

RAINBOW

WANDA WASSILEWSKA

First Published July 1943
Reprinted September 1943
Reprinted November 1943
Reprinted February 1944
Hutchinson International Authors Edition
Services Edition 1945

I

ONE ROAD RAN EAST AND WEST, THE OTHER NORTH AND SOUTH. The village stood on a knoll where the two roads crossed. Rows of cottages crouching low along both roads formed a cross in the centre of which a small belfry rose from a little green. At the foot of the knoll a brook covered with ice and snow wound through a gully. The bluish surface of the ice was pierced in places and running water gleamed black through the holes.

A woman came out of one of the cottages. She carried a yoke with two buckets slowly swinging from it to the rhythm of her movements. She picked her way cautiously down the slippery path to the bottom of the hill. Reaching the brook she set down the buckets and looked around. There was no one in sight. The cottages lay silent, smothered in their feather beds of snow. The woman paused and glanced uneasily up towards the village. Then she walked slowly along the water's edge, leaving the buckets behind on the ice.

The brook twisted into a wider gap flanked by a dense growth of bushes, of which only the tips showed above the thick blanket of the snow. The woman turned on to a faintly visible narrow track running through the undergrowth. Frozen bushes rustled all around her, impeding her progress. Sharp twigs, crusted with hard ice under a fluffy coat of snow, whipped her face and she had to fend them off with both hands.

Suddenly the track came to an end. The woman stopped and stared straight ahead with eyes as lifeless as glass.

Here the ground was broken, scored with trenches and humped into mounds, with scattered bushes growing here and there. But the woman was not looking at the snow-covered hummocks, nor at the bushes dotted with red drops of berries left over from the autumn.

She was looking ahead to where the shadowy outlines of vague shapes showed under the snow, a heap of rags lay dumped in a hollow and scraps of broken rusty iron sullied the bluish whiteness.

The woman advanced a few steps and slowly sank to her knees. *He* was lying there stark, stretched out to his full length, yet seeming to her smaller, much smaller, than he had been when alive. His face looked as if carved out of ebony. Her eyes groped over that face, every feature of which she knew to the last little wrinkle and which was yet so strange to her now with its set lips, its sunken nose, its closed lids, its stony calm. A hole gaped on

the side of the head, with bright red blood clotted around it like a scarlet emblem.

She knew that he could not have died instantly from that wound. He must have been alive when they pulled the clothes off him. Alive or at all events warm. Not death, but the hands of the spoilers had straightened those legs, drawn those arms down along the sides. On the day of the battle, the day he was killed, there had been a black frost which instantly gripped the dead and turned their bodies to stone. Nothing could have been taken from dead bodies that day. And yet he had been robbed of everything. They had pulled off his greatcoat, his boots, his trousers, even his socks, and left him lying there in only his tunic and the blue drawers which had so closely melted into his body that they looked as if drawn on black wood with blue chalk. It was impossible to distinguish between cloth and skin. In contrast with the blackened face, the naked feet were white with an unnatural chalky whiteness.

One foot had burst open through the frost and the dead flesh had split away like the sole of a boot, baring the bone.

The woman cautiously stretched out a hand, touched the dead shoulder, felt the coarse cloth of the tunic and beneath it the stony immobility of the body.

its wings heavily, circled and settled on a heap of rags under a bush. It bent its head and peered at a short while at the bullet-riddled cloth soiled with russet bloodstains. It sat motionless for an instant as if in deep thought, then sharply brought down its beak. There was a little dry sound like the tapping of a woodpecker. The frost had done its work. Everything left behind here a month ago was turned to stone.

The woman roused herself from her numbness.

"Shoo!"

The raven rose lazily and lit again beside a human shape half buried in the snow.

"Shoo!"

The woman picked up a frozen lump of snow and threw it at the bird. The raven hopped away, then slowly winged back to its perch on the tree. The woman rose from her knees, glanced once again at her son and walked back along the track to the brook.

She filled the buckets at the ice-hole, and climbed slowly uphill, bending forward under their weight. The sun was standing much higher by now, but the frost had not abated. The snow appeared blue and the woman wondered whether it was really blue or whether her eyes had been poisoned by that other blueness, the blueness of the cotton stuff frozen into the flesh on the outstretched chalky-white legs of her son.

A shivering sentry was stamping his feet in front of her cottage. He skipped from one foot to the other, wriggled his shoulders, shoved his hands under his armpits, then rubbed his cheeks with numbed fingers. The merciless frost pierced his leaky boots and green-grey summer overcoat, it nibbled at his fingers and pinched his eyes. The sentry scrutinized the woman closely, although he knew her, Fedossya Kravchuk, quite well, had known her from the very first day his unit took the village. She passed him as if he were not there at all. The door creaked and a cloud of vapour escaped on to the porch. A peevish voice asked: "Where have you been all this time? Keeping me waiting like this!"

Fedossya made no reply. She bit her lip to keep back the answer she ached to give, crossed over to the stove, poured water into a pot that stood on it and made up the dying fire.

"Pour me out a glass of water: I'm thirsty."

"Plenty of water in the bucket. Help yourself," Fedossya replied drily.

The other woman turned over angrily under the eiderdown.

"You wait until my husband gets back. I'll tell him!"

Fedossya shrugged her shoulders. Husband indeed! What next! . . .

She began piling more dry firewood on the fire, wondering why she, Fedossya Kravchuk, had been thus singled out. There were three hundred cottages in the village and from each at least one man had gone to the war. But of them all only *her* son was lying there by the brook in the gully because the Germans refused to allow the dead to be buried. Her son had lain there in the snow a whole month now and the frost had turned his face into black iron, had splintered his feet as if they were made of wood and had stained his fingers blue. Of course, other dead were there as well, but they were not sons or brothers or husbands of anyone in the village. Her son alone had been fated to die here, near his native village, not two hundred paces from the cottage of his birth. She alone was fated to watch hungry ravens circling over the unburied corpse of her son. On top of everything else, as if in deliberate mockery, this German officer had picked her cottage to live in with his fancy woman. If at least the hussy had been a German, brought from afar, a stranger speaking a strange tongue, hostile and hateful like all these Germans in green uniforms. Why did it have to be a local wench, selling herself and betraying her country for a pair of silk stockings and a bottle of French wine; betraying her own kin and her husband, an officer in the Red Army, and betraying all those lads lying there dead in the ravine, betraying everything. Fedossya's gorge rose with loathing at the thought of this slut sheltering here under her roof, sprawling on her feather bed, shouting orders at her and playing the lady in this house. And the wench knew no shame either—she did not walk with her eyes on the ground, she never even blushed when she met people, but strutted about as bold as brass and demanded service.

"Wait, just you wait," Fedossya whispered into the flickering fire, paying no heed to the scolding that came from the bedroom. "You'll get it good and proper, you will! You'll be a hundred times sorry that you were ever born."

She did not look round at the sound of rapid heavy footsteps. She knew well enough who it was and her face set in stony immobility.

Hauptmann Kurt Werner walked through the kitchen, ignoring the woman bending over the fire, and entered the bedroom.

"What's this? You still in bed?"

The woman in the bed pouted peevishly.

"Why should I get up? You are always out. . . . I'm so

bored. You go about your business and I have to stay here with this horrid peasant woman. You'll see, one day she'll poison me."

He sat down on the edge of the bed.

"Little silly! You are mistress here, understand? Why are you bored? Play the gramophone, you've got records enough, or read a book. I spend every free minute with you. But there's a war on. Something crops up all the time."

She sighed.

"War! Always this war. . . . You might ask for leave at last and take me away from here."

The officer shrugged his shoulders.

"Silly puss. This is no time for holidays. And if I sent you to Germany all by yourself, what on earth would you do there? Better stay as we are."

She gave no reply, reached for the underwear lying on a chair nearby, heaved herself up slowly and began to dress. Kurt Werner got up from the bed, sat down on the wooden settee and watched her. Yes, he liked her well enough. Otherwise he would not have carted her about with him for three whole months. She was different, quite different from the women he was used to and different from the women he saw here.

"Oh, by the way, Pussy, I am told that the schoolmistress here is your sister."

Pussy's hand, holding a stocking, froze in mid-air. She bent her head with a gesture that made her look like a sick marmoset. She knew this was what attracted him to her, her looking like a fragile delicate little animal.

Her hand, tiny as a child's, smoothed her hair back, behind her ears. Her ears were funny too, narrow, pointed at the tips, triangular, like the ears of some small furry beast. Her teeth were triangular too, thought Werner; funny he had never noticed that until now when she bared them, biting her lips.

"What if she is?"

She brushed back her hair. Her brightly varnished triangular nails shone like claws wet with blood.

"Yes, she's my sister all right. What of it?"

"Your sister doesn't like us very much."

Suspicion glittered in Pussy's round black eyes.

"And what about you? Perhaps you liked my sister too much, eh?"

He laughed, a hoarse cackle of a laugh.

"No. You do get ideas! I don't like plump blondes. Her

legs are as thick as . . . ” He wanted to say as thick as my wife’s, but stopped himself just in time.

Pussy looked down with satisfaction at her own legs, short but slim.

“Yes, she is a bit fat.”

“You never told me you had a sister here.”

“Why should I? She lived here, I lived somewhere else, we hardly ever met. She is quite different. . . . ”

“What do you mean: different?”

Pussy thoughtfully arranged her hair over her ear. The sham stone in her earring twinkled.

“She teaches brats, works all the time, and what has she to show for it? Nothing at all. But she is satisfied with anything; she is pleased with everything.”

“In other words, a female Bolshevik?”

“She may be a Bolshevik for all I know,” Pussy replied sleepily and then suddenly woke up again: “Why are you asking so many questions about her? You say you don’t like her, so why all these questions?”

“Just curiosity. If I am interested in her, it isn’t because she’s a woman. You can take that from me.”

Pussy never noticed the peculiar stress he laid on the word *woman*. She was busy pulling on her stockings and passing her silk combinations over her head.

The German officer took a parcel from his pocket.

“Well, little girl, I just looked in for a minute to give you this bit of chocolate. I must go, I’m very busy to-day. Have a good time. I shan’t be late.”

Pussy made a wry face.

“Alone again. You always leave me alone, all day. When will this war be over at last?”

“It’ll be over some time.”

“It’s easy for you to talk.”

She peeled off the coloured wrapping and buried her sharp little teeth in the slab of chocolate, without bothering to break off a smaller piece.

“You can play the gramophone. I’ll send you over some dinner. Well, so long.”

He gave her a careless kiss and left her. The sentry was still stamping his feet outside the cottage, vainly trying to warm them. He sprang to attention when he saw the officer, who passed him and turned on to the green. The large house, formerly the seat of the village soviet, now the German Kommandantur, was crowded with soldiers, who drew themselves up and saluted

as the officer entered. He hardly returned their greeting and pushed open the door of his improvised office, calling over his shoulder: "Bring her in!"

He sat down at his desk and yawned. Lucky Pussy! She could stay in bed until all hours, while he had to get up at dawn and work all day and yet his whole day was full of unfinished business.

Soldiers brought in a woman wearing a thick sheepskin coat and dark dress.

The officer glanced at her incredulously.

"Is this the one?"

"Yes, sir!"

She stood heavily and awkwardly in front of the table. Hair greying at the temples showed under her shawl, the face was plain, rough-hewn, a common peasant face.

"Your name?"

"Olena Kostyuk."

The German officer sat twisting a pencil in his fingers and throwing stealthy glances at the woman standing in front of him. Unless the soldiers had made a mistake, he thought, he was in for a long and unpleasant investigation, to judge by the resolute line of the chin and the steady eyes staring him in the face.

"You have been out with the guerillas?"

She was neither frightened nor confused. Her eyes never left his face as she replied:

"Yes, I was out with the guerillas."

"M-m-m, yes. . . ." The immediate admission surprised him. He began to draw doodles on a piece of paper lying on the table.

"Why did you come back to the village? What did they send you here for?"

"Nobody sent me. I came on my own."

"Oh, yes? On your own? And why?"

This time she did not reply. Her dark eyes gazed steadily into the lean bony face of the officer, into his colourless eyes surrounded by bleached eyelashes.

"Well?"

She was silent.

"Come now. You were out with the guerillas and now you suddenly come home to the village? Is there no discipline in that gang of yours? You had better tell me right now why you came back."

"I came on my own. I couldn't go on."

"Why couldn't you? Things not going so well perhaps?"

Your commander was killed during the last attack, eh? The group went to pieces?"

"I don't know about the group. I came home."

"Why so suddenly?"

The woman's lips moved soundlessly.

"You saw that all this guerilla business was nonsense, a crime, just banditry? You didn't want to take part in it any more?"

The woman shook her head.

"No. I couldn't any more."

"Why?"

She hesitated, made an effort and then said straight into those watery, blinking eyes with their colourless lashes: "I came home for the birth."

"What?"

"I came to bear my child."

"So that's it!"

He laughed and the woman shivered when she heard that cackling hoarse laughter.

"Surely you're not feeling cold in here? There's a good fire and yet you are wrapped up as if it were freezing. Take off that shawl!"

Obediently she threw the heavy thick shawl off her shoulders and laid it on the seat.

"Take off your coat!"

She hesitated an instant, then unbuttoned and took off her sheepskin. He watched her intently. No, there could be no doubt. She was near her time.

The woman breathed heavily. The man knew that standing on her feet was hard on her and purposely prolonged the interview, played with his pencil, and left longer and longer pauses between his questions.

She readily replied to all questions concerning herself. Yes, she was married. Her husband had been killed in the war. Long ago, before the revolution, she had worked on the land, reaping the master's corn, milking the master's cow. After the revolution she worked on a collective farm. She joined the guerilla group as soon as it was formed. She had kept her condition a secret from them. When her time was approaching and she found it difficult to move about, she returned to the village. She wanted to give birth to her child in peace.

"Oh, yes, give birth to the child in peace," he repeated.

"Was it you who blew up the bridge last week?"

"Yes."

"Who helped you?"

"No one. I did it alone."

"That's a lie. We know all about it, so you had better tell me straight away."

"I did it alone."

"All right. Where is your group?"

She gave no reply. Her dark eyes looked calmly into the eyes of the German. He heaved a sigh. Same old story again. Stubborn silence, long fruitless questioning, all sorts of unpleasantness, and usually all in vain. He knew that people either talked from the start or never talked, whatever you did to them. In this case the woman's first ready answers had misled him. But his original impression had been correct—the stubborn line of the chin, the resolute and self-reliant set of the lips. Yes, she would talk of herself, tell everything concerning herself, but of those others—never a word.

"Well, tell us then from where you came to the village?"

Silence. He tapped the table nervously with his pencil, but did not look at the prisoner. Suddenly he felt disgustingly, stickily, hopelessly sick of it all. He wanted to get away from it. Why not give it up and go home to Pussy, leaving the grilling to a subordinate? But he wanted badly to force from the prisoner at least some scrap of information about the guerilla group which had made its presence felt throughout the district, and he had little confidence in the ability of his subordinates. Besides, they would have to make use of a dull-witted interpreter whose knowledge of the language was in addition only slight, while he himself had perfect command of both Ukrainian and Russian. He had prepared himself a long time in advance for this war, but this was not the sort of job he had expected to do here, though of course languages were always useful in war-time and the time spent on learning them was not wasted.

"Well, what about it? The commander of your group was called Curly, wasn't he? But that is only a nickname. What is his real name?"

Silence. He saw that she was mortally tired. Drops of sweat gathered on her temples, her forehead, the hollows along her nose. The wrinkles in the corners of her mouth deepened and her arms hung powerless along her body.

"Are you going to talk or aren't you?"

He suddenly felt tired himself. Why not chuck it all and go home? He wondered whether Pussy was up at last or whether she had crawled back into bed after he left her.

But Pussy was not in bed. She took a long time over her dressing, then looked at herself in the mirror a long time. She started the gramophone, but the familiar records soon palled. She wanted to talk to somebody. But to whom?

She went out into the kitchen, dipped water and drank her fill. Fedossya Kravchuk was squatting on a low stool near the stove and peeling potatoes. Pussy sat down on the window-seat and watched the narrow strips of peel slide through Fedossya's fingers, curl up and drop down into the basket

"The potatoes are terribly small."

Fedossya made no reply.

"Are they always so small round here?"

Silence.

"Why can't you answer a civil question?"

Fedossya raised her head and looked at Pussy silently, indifferently, coldly. Then she bent over her work once more.

"Why do you look at me like that? As if I wasn't a human being. Not a soul to speak to all day. I might as well be dead." Pussy began to feel sorry for herself. In addition she felt sick and it occurred to her that she ought not to have eaten all that chocolate at one go. But she never could resist eating up everything Kurt brought home for her without an instant's delay.

A potato fell into the water with a plop, splashing water over the clay floor.

"I have never done you any harm, have I?"

Fedossya's grey eyes threw her one quick searching glance. But there was no other answer to the question.

"I sit here alone day after day. Kurt just looks in for an instant and goes off again. I have no one to talk to, no one to sit with in here. One can't even go out in this frost. I shall go crazy like this. Nothing but the gramophone and I know all the records by heart already. Do you like listening to the gramophone?"

She clenched her fists angrily until the pointed crimson nails cut into her palms.

"Why don't you answer me? Have I got the plague, or what?"

Fedossya raised her head at that.

"What you've got is worse than the plague. And you will die a worse death than from plague."

Pussy was startled and gaped at Fedossya, her mouth and round eyes wide open. She had never expected this Kravchuk woman to speak. But now, suddenly, she had broken the absurd silence she had maintained so long—and how! What was Pussy to do now? Shout at her, hit her, burst out crying—or go back

to her room, wind up the gramophone and put on the gayest, loudest record?

To her own great surprise Pussy did none of these things. Instead, she began to make excuses for herself.

"What is all the fuss about? What was I to do? Starve? Wait? For what? The Germans will stay here for ever. A girl has to look out for herself. Seryosha is sure to have been killed long ago. And this Kurt is not a bad fellow. I know he is not bad and I don't want to live here any more: I have had enough of it all. He will take me back with him to Dresden: it's much better there. What sort of a life did I have up to now? Nothing to wear, not a stitch. Every pair of stockings a worry, every ladder in them a problem . . . how to get another pair."

"Yes, that's just it! That's just what I was saying. Stockings! . . . Your sister is a schoolteacher, a decent girl and does a decent job. But you, with your stockings! I don't want to call you by your right name, you. . . . And your Kurt won't take you anywhere at all, he'll throw you over, as sluts like you deserve to be. He'll throw you over even before he has to clear out himself, though that will be soon enough. Don't worry, just you hang on here nice and comfortable and sleep with your German on my feather bed. You haven't very long to go anyway, either of you. Our boys will come back, they'll show you where the flies go in winter."

Pussy shivered on her seat. Every word cut like a whiplash. Then she screamed, her voice trembling with rage: "Very well, then! You wait! I'll tell Kurt why you always take so long to bring up the water. I'll tell him where you go, as soon as he comes in."

Fedossya jumped up. The peeled potatoes rolled on the floor. The knife clattered to the ground. Bending forward, her face set, she walked towards Pussy, who went pale with fright, drew up her legs under the seat and raised her hands to her breast as if to shield herself.

"How do you know where I go? How do you know?"

But Pussy had already remembered that there was a sentry outside her window who would come in if she called. Her fear vanished.

"I know all I want to know every time."

"Oh, you . . ."

Fedossya conquered the desire to take by the throat this little dark creature who looked like a rat in a corner—to throttle her and then crush her underfoot. She felt an intolerable repugnance at the thought of touching that fragile feeble body—the repug-

nance of a healthy normal being towards something perverted and diseased. She spat on the ground, returned to her seat by the stove and hastily resumed her potato-peeling. The ribbons of peelings again began to slide in curls through her fingers and splash into the basin, sprinkling water over the floor. Pussy tossed her head and went to her room to start the gramophone. First she searched for a gay, a very gay, record, but at the last moment she felt tears of anger and self-pity gather in her throat and she chose a sentimental romance.

Fedossya went on peeling potatoes and felt her heart grow heavy. So *she* knew. Knew and would certainly tell her German. Up to now she had kept the knowledge hidden in herself, as a snake secretes its venom, but now she would want her revenge, she would tell her German.

In the bedroom, a deep, crooning voice sang a sentimental ditty.

What next? Fedossya was sure that the German officer would not let such a thing pass. The ban on the burial of the Red Army men killed in the last fighting was still in force. The Germans wanted them to lie there in the gully near the village, stripped naked, a prey to storms, frosts and ravens, as a warning to others and a symbol of the German triumph. At first the peasants made attempts to bury the dead, but it was no good—a careful watch was kept over the gully. Young Pashchuk had crept out there one night with a spade, but since that night he himself was lying there with the others, his head in a snow-drift and a bullet in his chest. So matters had been left as they were. People realized there was nothing to be done.

But no one in the whole village had a son there, only she. Only her Vassya had been fated to be posted to a unit passing through this village. What a joyful surprise it had been at the time. Vassya had suddenly burst in, cheerful, laughing, full of life. But only for a minute, a very short one. Then at dawn the Germans came, took the Red Army men unawares and Vassya happened to be in the group which was surrounded—and perished to the last man in the gully.

Fedossya had found him the same day. Her heart led her straight to the spot where he lay. He was already dead and the Germans had already found time to strip him.

Since then, for a whole month, she had been out there every day to watch the changes in her son, to watch the frost blackening his face to the blackness of iron, and splintering his naked feet. She had become quite used to seeing her dead child every day and sometimes twice a day when she went to fetch water. But now? What would happen now?

The gramophone in the other room wailed its way through the sentimental rubbish.

The German officer would never allow it to go on, would not let it pass. Fedossya had no fears for herself. She had fears for her child, her dead child, who had perished there in the gully, who lay there frozen as if turned to stone, with a bullet-hole in his temple. Was she going to lose him a second time? The Germans would surely take him, throw him somewhere in some unmarked pit, outrage him, mutilate him as they knew how, as they knew only too well how.

The moaning of the gramophone irritated her beyond endurance.

Pussy was in a dreamy mood and played the same record ten times over. The gramophone sang of love which endured, not of happiness which was past, of letters which no longer meant anything. It sang tender words to the tune of the dark thoughts passing through the mind of the woman sitting outside by the kitchen stove. Fedossya gripped the blunt knife in her fingers, yet felt no pain. A drop of blood appeared on the cut finger. She wiped it off with the corner of her apron.

The gramophone droned on.

What was she to do, how was she to act? It seemed to Fedossya that she had to save Vassya, save him from something terrible and cruel, far more cruel than death itself. But how?

She knew it was impossible to take him away from the place where he lay. He was frozen into the snow, merged with its icy crust. Only the spring thaw would free him from his cold bed. But even if . . . how could she lift him, even though he had grown smaller and was no bigger now than he had been when he was fifteen or sixteen? How could she lift him, where could she carry him, where hide him from the eyes of the killers?

Still the gramophone sang on.

Hateful German hands would touch him, hateful German boots kick him. Bestial German mugs would grin and snigger at him, and Hauptmann Kurt Werner would laugh his hoarse cackling laugh. Fedossya wrung her hands in helpless despair. She forgot the potatoes, forgot the fire which was dying down beneath an ever-thickening layer of ashes, and sat motionless, staring rigidly in front of her.

She had thought that nothing worse could come, that every blow had already fallen on her heart. And now she found that there was more. There was no end, no limit to suffering. The black cloud which closed over the village one December day was threatening with fresh innumerable agonies every instant.

Then suddenly the thought shot through her: how had *she* found out? Who told her?

Familiar faces rose in her memory. The schoolmistress? No. Fedossya hurriedly rejected this suspicion. On no account could it have been the schoolmistress. But who was it?

Everyone in the village knew it, of course. But they could all be trusted. And this Pussy, she never went anywhere, and in any case no one would talk to her. So how could she have found out? Who could have betrayed the sorrow of a mother to the enemy, who could have delivered Vassya's dead body, his blood, his death, his agony, into the hands of the German torturers.

The gramophone whirled and stopped moaning. Pussy pulled on a pair of felt boots and carefully buttoned up her fur coat. The fur coat was a little too big for her. Kurt had pulled it off some villager and had given it to her, his wife. It was warm, one could put one's hands into the sleeves and its great fluffy collar protected the face from frostbite.

Pussy left the house and caught her breath. The air was as transparent as ice and as cold, a tremendous glass column filling the whole world. The snow was blue where shadows fell on it, but in the sun it sparkled like diamonds, burning and glittering, piercing the eye with its merciless glare. From the knoll on which the village stood she could see stretching right and left an endless plain, dazzling white and azure. The frost had seized the earth and sky in its grip and held as in a vice the little village quietly crouching on the crossing of two roads. Pussy looked towards the cottages. Here and there German soldiers were at work. On the green in front of the church a battery of guns with its crew stood out black against the snow. None of the villagers were about. Pussy walked on, intending to pay a visit to Kurt in his office.

On the edge of the green rose the gallows—two poles and a crossbeam. In the middle of it hung a man. Pussy walked past this symbol of Kurt's power over the village with complete indifference. She was used to the spectacle—the lad had already been hanging there a month ago when she arrived to live with Kurt. Now he had stiffened, hardened and lost his human shape and looked more like a piece of wood than a human body. The snow crunched loudly under her feet as if she were walking on broken glass. She walked along the deserted street. The windows of the cottages were covered from top to bottom with a white film of rime and looked like eyes veiled by a cataract. Smoking chimneys were few and far between,—those were the

billets of the German soldiers. In the other cottages no one cooked any food—there was none to cook.

The door of one of the cottages opened and a face looked out, but catching sight of Pussy it hurriedly drew back. The door slammed shut. Pussy shrugged her shoulders. They certainly kept out of her way as if she were a leper, took care not to have any contact with her even by chance. The children ran away as fast as they could when they happened to meet her in the street. Let them! Who cared? Anyway, they would all die of cold and starvation, that was their lot. Meanwhile Pussy was alive and well, wore a fine fur coat, could guzzle chocolate to her heart's content and later would go away to Germany with her captain husband. People shaped their own destinies—the villagers had chosen theirs and Pussy hers. The fools—they believed in something that would never come to pass, waited for something that could never be. They would be bitterly disappointed. Kurt had explained to her in detail why the Germans would win without fail and why all these people here would perish unless they worked conscientiously for the Germans. Of course, the villagers didn't want to accept these facts, be they never so plain. They were still waiting for the Red Army—but she, Pussy, could do very well without them. Wasn't she better off than any of them? Very much better.

The snow creaked underfoot and her eyes hurt with the white dazzle. How long would these cursed frosts last? Pussy thought how nice it would be to curl up like a cat in the sun and get warm, warm right through to the marrow of her bones, feel the caressing warmth of the sun over her whole body. But now even the blinding sunshine seemed like an icicle, radiating cold instead of warmth.

The sentry at the door let her pass. She knocked and without waiting for a reply, paying no attention to the alarm of Kurt's subordinates, she walked into his office.

"What's up?" Kurt asked.

"Nothing," she replied peevishly. "I was lonely without you, that's all." She took in the woman standing in front of the table with a rapid glance. A middle-aged woman with greying hair, a big belly, obviously pregnant. Pussy sat down on the edge of a chair.

"Will you be long?"

"Haven't I told you . . . can't you see I'm busy?" He was obviously annoyed, drew her aside and whispered angrily: "How often have I asked you not to come here! Can't you see that I am busy? As soon as I am free I'll come home."

She pouted like a disappointed child.

"I'm so terribly, fearfully bored. Couldn't you come home for lunch at least? I'm so worried. You're never there. Why on earth do you want to talk to this old woman? Can't somebody else do it instead of you?"

"No, of course not. This old woman is a guerilla fighter. Understand?"

Pussy was struck all of a heap.

"A guerilla fighter? Kurt, what are you saying? Look at her, she is about to have a baby any minute!"

"That's just it," he interrupted her. "Go now, go home, I'll be along soon."

With a submissive gesture she stroked his sleeve.

"Kurt, my darling, let me stay a little and listen. May I? Why shouldn't I?"

"All right," he agreed, "stay if you like, but I warn you it's a tedious business," and he drew up a chair for her.

Pussy unbuttoned her coat and sat down. An insipid smile played about her lips while her round black eyes stared at the woman standing in front of the table. So this was a guerilla fighter—that was funny, very funny. She knew that Kurt was afraid of the guerillas, although he never admitted being afraid of anything. But he was afraid of the guerillas. Pussy knew it, and for some unknown reason she was pleased about it. So there was something that self-reliant invincible Kurt was afraid of, Kurt who knew all the answers and for whom everything was always quite clear and simple.

No, this was not what she had thought guerilla fighters might be like. She had pictured them as giants, long-haired and bearded, armed with axes—mysterious men hiding in the woods despite the terrible cold which had for so long held the whole world in bondage. But this was just a common peasant woman, like Fedossya Kravchuk, and pregnant at that. Pussy squinted towards the great protruding belly which made the rusty black skirt much shorter in front than at the back. She felt glad that she herself was small and slim, that she was sitting quietly, wrapped in warm furs, and that she could get up and go away whenever she liked, start the gramophone, dance with Kurt this very evening.

Kurt was asking his questions in a tired colourless voice. The woman replied. At first Pussy listened to the questions and answers, but discovered very soon that it was all very boring indeed, just as Kurt had said. Not only was it uninteresting, it was quite silly. Kurt was putting the same questions over and

over again and the woman gave the same replies, using the same words every time.

Olena was tired to death by now. Black spots swam in front of her eyes, a black wave rising from somewhere under the table was veiling her eyes. She had to make a violent effort to escape the fog which enveloped her from all sides. Then she saw emerging out of the eddying darkness the officer behind his table, the papers lying on it, the glass panes of the window behind the officer's back. She felt a cold, sticky sweat break out on her face. Her hands grew heavy like iron weights, her legs ached beyond endurance. They must be terribly swollen, she thought. How long had she been standing there? An hour? Two? Three? Perhaps even more, perhaps a whole day? No, that couldn't be possible, the sun was shining brightly beyond the window, so all this could not have lasted as long as it seemed.

Her thighs ached, her whole body hurt as if the veins were being slowly dragged out one by one. And now on top of it all that slut had come. Olena knew about her, knew who she was. There she was sitting back comfortably, looking at Olena with her round button eyes. Now she was taking off her fur hat and arranging her hair. Olena's tired eyes caught the glitter of a glass diamond in Pussy's ear-ring and fastened on to it. The stone sparkled, scattering tiny points of fire, and as the eddying darkness rose again, only its sharp rays pierced the fog in front of Olena's eyes. She staggered, clenched her fists and stood erect again. No, she would not fall down, not in front of this officer's slut, who sold her own people and crawled into this German's bed and who now sat there dressed in furs with sparkling ear-rings in her ears, watching, as if it were a show, how a pregnant woman was being tormented by a German officer.

A vacant smile again appeared on Pussy's face, but she was not thinking of Olena and did not hear either questions or answers. She was warm and comfortable and she was pleased to think that she was sitting here in Kurt's office, the only person in the whole village who could walk in there alone and walk out again whenever she liked, while those others were led in here by two soldiers with bayonets on their rifles and later were led out again, never to return. It was nice that they were all afraid of Kurt and that Kurt belonged to her, and her alone, that she was allowed to be peevish and capricious, that Kurt would call her his little monkey and later take her with him to Dresden.

"Remember, you are a mother," Kurt said, and Olena clutched at the word as if a lifebelt had been thrown to her in the whirlpool of giddiness which was engulfing her.

Yes, of course, she was a mother. The German officer never dreamt how he had helped her, helped her just when the earth was heaving under her feet, when a strange weakness had seized her and everything around her was swirling and drowning in darkness.

"You are a mother."

Who said that? The German officer behind that table or Curly, the cheerful pock-marked lad who led the group there in the forest?

"You are a mother."

Olena was not thinking now of the child which she carried under her heart, which compressed her lungs and impeded her breathing. She was thinking of those lads in the forest, who had all called her 'mother.' She had been older than any of the others, very much older. And although she had scouted for them and blown up the bridge, this was not what she had regarded as her real work. Her real job had been to wash their clothes, cook for them, nurse them in illness, bandage their wounds, mend their torn clothes, do all the things a mother does for her children. And they had all called her 'mother.'

"You are a mother."

The words were like a message from those lads in the forest, whose lives now depended on a word from her. It was a greeting from them, recalling her to her duty.

"Where is the group hiding?"

Olena saw every track, every bush, every tree in that forest thicket so clearly in her mind that she was suddenly afraid that the watery eyes of the officer with their rim of colourless lashes might discern and follow that road along her thoughts. She felt she had to think quickly of something else, never mind what, her house, her neighbours, anything but that forest track. But her mind clung to the path, the trees, the shelters among the trees, the cheery faces of the sixteen lads and the pock-marked merry grin of Curly, their leader. Sixteen lads with their mother. Yes, the sixteen in the forest were her sons, sixteen daring, fearless sons.

"I know nothing of the group. They went away, I don't know where."

Kurt Werner banged his fist on the table. Four hours of questions and not a squeak out of the bitch. He collected his papers angrily, slapped them into a drawer and slammed the drawer home.

"Guard!"

A soldier appeared immediately.

"Take her to the barn. Here, you! Maybe the cold will bring you to your senses. Think it over and when you have changed your mind, call the sentry. He'll let me know." He stood up.

"Come on, Pussy. We'll have lunch together."

Pussy skipped with joy. How clever of her to come here. Kurt would have stayed until all hours if she hadn't come.

The whiteness of the snow was dazzling. Under Kurt's boots the snow crunched even louder than under Pussy's felt boots. On the rim of the horizon where the azure of the snow met the colder blue of the sky, a rainbow had appeared. Its shining iridescent pillar rose and dissolved into the vast dome of the sky, a vision as clear and yet as elusive as the scent of a flower.

"A rainbow, look," Kurt said with surprise. "A rainbow in winter. Do you often get them here?"

Pussy thought for a moment.

"No, I don't think so, at least I never saw one yet."

Kurt Werner stood still, staring at the luminous coloured column uniting earth and heaven.

"Come on, Kurt, I'm cold, my feet are freezing. . . ."

"They say rainbows are good omens . . ."

"A rainbow is just a rainbow." Pussy was losing patience and pulled at his sleeve to make him go on.

In these few minutes the rainbow had grown and stretched across the sky, spanning the earth with its arc of delicate pink and green and violet lined with a sheen of gold. The sky seemed a glass cupola covering the world. On the village green the crew of the gun battery were craning their necks, staring at the unusual spectacle.

When Kurt and Pussy reached the cottage Fedossya Kravchuk was standing at the door and looking at the rainbow, with a calm but intense scrutiny.

"They say rainbows are good omens," the German officer said.

The old peasant woman shrugged her shoulders.

"Yes, they say rainbows are good omens," she said with a peculiar stress on the words, and then stood aside to let them pass. She herself remained on the threshold. Standing in bodice and skirt only, with her arms bare she never felt the bitter cold as she stared at the shining apparition, the triumphal arch which filled the sky, iridescent in all colours, soaked in a soft, golden, all-pervading lustre.

II

PUSSY WAS SLEEPING CURLED UP INTO A BALL, WITH HER HEAD on Kurt's shoulder. She was breathing quietly and regularly, like an animal. The German was sprawling flat on his back and snoring. Fedossya Kravchuk, lying on the ledge above the kitchen stove, heard that snore and it irritated her beyond endurance. It seemed to her that it was that snore that kept her awake. She was staring with wide-open eyes at the window, at the sheen of the moonlight on the thick coat of rime covering the panes. In the translucent bluish light the table, the wooden settee, the buckets on the floor threw strange frightening shadows.

Still, it was night at last. At last the day was over, one more day. Fedossya was having a short respite from the cackle of the German and the affected giggle of his wench, from the sidelong threatening glances she had thrown her, Fedossya, all that evening. The hussy had obviously decided to have a little fun with Fedossya first, before she gave her away. So she had said nothing to her German, but followed Fedossya about with her eyes, an evil little smile on her face. She was gloating over the woman whom she held in the hollow of her hand, at whom she could strike whenever she liked. Her minute of power thrilled her. She could trample on the heart of a mother, she had *him* in her power, him who was lying out there in the gully in the snow. Any minute she could deliver him into the filthy hands of the enemy, could break his sleep even in death, throw him to the German wolves.

All that evening Fedossya's heart had been numb. But now as she lay sleepless, watching the blue shimmer of moonlight on the window, listening to the hateful snore from the next room, her whole being suddenly stiffened in revolt. Let them have their way! Hadn't they already taken everything from him, his life, even his boots, his coat, his trousers. He had already been touched by German hands anyway, they had already thrown him into the snow, left him in that bitter frost while perhaps he was still alive. A German bullet had already shed his blood, he was already dead, he had perished defending his home village. He would never look at his mother again with his merry grey eyes, never sing his favourite song again. What did it matter that they might again outrage him, desecrate his dead body? So much the worse for them, so much the worse. Whatever they did, the villagers would remember Vassya Kravchuk as the cheerful lad who could sing better than anyone else in the village

and who perished in the gully near the same brook where he had so often watered the horses; who perished in defence of his village, his country, his native tongue, who died for the happiness and freedom of his people. Nothing the Germans could do would wipe out the memory of that. The people would remember, too, that the enemy gave him no peace even after death; that they defiled even his dead body. Not only the heart of his mother would remember. The villagers would keep it in mind and so would those who would come and drive out these German blackguards. And they, the Germans, would have to pay a thousand times for every drop of her Vassya's blood, for every minute he lay naked in the snow, for every kick of a German boot.

She wished now that morning would come. Let that black rat tell, let her squeak her betrayal through her sharp teeth, the sooner the better. Let her see, with her round black eyes, that Fedossya would not pale, would not weep or go down on her knees to beg them not to take away the only thing left to her, the dead body of her son turned to stone by the cold.

That cursed woman was concealing her discovery, toying with it, playing with the torment of a mother's heart. But Fedossya would strike her power out of her hand. The black rat was mistaken, she would never see Fedossya weep or beg, her expected triumph would come to nought.

Fedossya felt her heart harden and fill with blood. Now she knew that no one could hurt her any more, no one could wound her. Her strong armour of hatred would protect her from all blows.

At intervals a shadow fell across the blue radiance of the window. The sentry was walking to and fro in front of the house. The snow crunched under his feet as he stamped them in a vain attempt to warm his freezing toes. Fedossya smiled. Go on, guard your officer's sleep, he is sleeping comfortably with his wench on a bed taken from the peasants, under a feather bed stolen from them. Guard him as much as you like, you'll never save him from harm, however much you may stamp your feet, not if you froze your feet off on sentry-go, not if you marched up and down in front of the house until you died. . . . The night would come when there would be a rude awakening from deep sleep, when barefooted men would rush out into the frost unclothed. A night would come when you would envy the dead lying unburied in the gully, and the lad Levanyuk whom you left hanging on the gallows more than a month. A night, when the officer's harlot would envy the fate of Olena Kostyuk.

Olena! Once more the riddle began to torment Fedossya

Who could have told? Olena had come quietly, had gone to her own house. How could the Germans have known? They had not counted the inhabitants, had not had time to register every peasant woman in the village. Olena had kept herself to herself, did not go out at all—and yet only two days after her return the Germans had come to her house, dragged her out, taken her away to be questioned. That meant that there was an informer in the village, someone who had given Olena away, who had told about Vassya in the gully. An enemy lay in ambush somewhere, hidden so well that the village never knew, never even guessed who it could be. An enemy who saw everything and reported it to the Germans. Some villager, who might have recognized Vassya, who knew Olena, who knew everything. Who could it be?

Fedossya herself had known about Olena, of course, as soon as she had returned to the village. Plenty of others knew as well, but they were all people of the village, members of the collective farm community, fathers and mothers of the fighters who carried on the struggle on all fronts of the vast homeland throughout these terrible icy days and white nights. Who was the serpent, the poisonous reptile, fattened on the golden grain of his mother-country, who now sank deadly fangs into her body?

The distant sound of voices fell on Fedossya's ear. In the clear frosty air and the perfect silence of the icy night, the slightest sound was loudly and distinctly audible. Voices were heard and shouts. Fedossya sprang from the stove, went to the window and scraped off the thick coat of hoar frost. With her warm breath she thawed out a little round spot on the glass. Now she could see what was going on outside. The glass fogged over and froze again, and Fedossya had to breathe and wipe, breathe and wipe with her kerchief all the time. She could see along the street, down to the green and to the house which was formerly the seat of the village soviet. There, a little beyond the house, loomed the dark bulk of the big barn.

It was as light as day. The moonlight turned the whole world into a blue slab of ice. And Fedossya saw clearly that a naked woman was running along the street leading from the green. No, she was not running—she was bending forward and taking little steps with a waddling gait. Her enormous belly showed clearly in the moonlight. Behind her a soldier walked, his bayonet glittering on the barrel of his rifle. When the woman stopped for an instant, the bayonet pricked her in the back. The soldier shouted something, two other soldiers shouted too and the pregnant woman again moved on, bending forward, attempting to run. Fifty yards forward, then the soldier made his victim

turn about and walk fifty yards back again, to and fro, to and fro, again and again. The torturers roared with laughter, their coarse guffaws rang in Fedossya's ears.

Fedossya gripped the window-frame hard and watched. So this was going on in the night, while the officer was snoring with his slut in bed. Well, he could sleep at his ease, sure that his men were carrying out his instructions to the letter.

There she was, Olena Kostyuk. A long time ago Fedossya and she had worked together, day-labourers on the estate of the local landowner. Together they had gone in fear of the overseer, of the overseer's stick and even more perhaps of his love-making, and they had wept together many a time over their fate, the dreary, hopeless drudgery of village labouring girls.

Then they had worked together on the collective farm. Together they had joyfully watched the sprouting wheat and the growing milk-yield of the herds, together they had rejoiced at the new life that was growing better and pleasanter year by year.

And now a terrible fate had overtaken Olena Kostyuk. She was being driven at the point of the bayonet fifty yards forward, fifty yards back, naked, barefoot in the snow, only a day or two before her time came to give birth to her child. Soldiers guffawing, pricking her with bayonets! . . .

Fedossya did not cry out, did not weep. She felt the blood clot in her heart. This was how it had to be, how it would be while these brutes were here. As if they wanted to show off, to demonstrate that they would stop at nothing at all. She looked at Olena, but it was not sympathy with her suffering that filled Fedossya's heart. No; there was no room for pity in this business. It seemed to Fedossya as if she herself were running there naked and barefoot on the snow, delivered up to the brutality of the German soldiers. She felt as if the frozen snow were slashing her own feet, as if the steel of the bayonets were piercing her own back. Not only Olena Kostyuk—no, the whole village was falling face down in the snow and laboriously getting up again under the blows of German rifle-butts. It was not the feet of Olena Kostyuk alone which dripped blood on to the jagged humps of frozen snow—the whole village was being bled white in the grip of the German fist, under the German heel, under the unclean German yoke.

Through the little peep-hole of clear glass Fedossya looked grimly on. Yes, all was as it should be. With their iron fists and steel bayonets the German soldiers were teaching the peasants to know the enemy for what he was. But without knowing it the soldiers were teaching the peasants something else as well.

—teaching them what Soviet power had meant to them. Fedossya was sure that in villages where the Germans had left their mark in streams of tears and blood even for a single day, there would never in all eternity, from generation to generation, be anyone dissatisfied with the Soviet government, anyone indifferent to it, anyone lazy or indolent. Fedossya called to mind many old and recent debates with other village women and saw that life itself was answering all questions, solving all problems, teaching the people by its own terrible methods.

Olena fell again and got up again. Where did she get the strength to go on? Fedossya knew. She felt that Olena's heart was clogged with black blood, like her own—the blood of hatred which gives strength.

In every cottage people stood behind frozen windows and watched through peepholes thawed by their breath. With Olena they ran over the snow, with Olena they fell down, with her they stood up, with her they felt the stab of the bayonets and heard savage laughter ringing in their ears.

Olena knew that the eyes of the village were on her. This was her village, here she had grown up in back-breaking labour, here she had lived to see better days, here she had with her own hands built a golden bridge to a happier future. Blood was dripping from her wounded feet, cut by the sharp edges of frozen snow. Fearful agony tore at her vitals. Her head swam. She stumbled and fell, but hardly felt the blows from the rifle-butts. She got up, not because the soldiers beat her, but because she could not, would not, lie there in the road under the boots of these soldiers. She would not, could not, grant the enemy the satisfaction of knowing that they had conquered her, that they had pulled her down as dogs pull down a rabbit. In fact, she no longer felt anything at all. It was only her body that dripped blood, that fell down, that dragged itself along the snowy road. She, Olena, felt as if she herself were outside it all. She saw the road and the soldiers as if in a dream. There was a singing in her ears. "Mother!" she heard Curly call out to her cheerfully. The tips of the trees rustled far above, swaying in the wind; the poles of the shelters creaked; then she saw a quick flame creep along the beams of the bridge, and lick it with its hot red tongue until the bridge went up in fire and thunder. She saw her husband Mikola going away to the war and raising his hand in farewell at the turning of the road.

Olena fell down again. It was with difficulty that she got on her feet this time.

"Faster!" shouted the soldier walking behind her.

"Give her one in the belly, that'll freshen her up," advised another German.

"No, she might conk out before her time," laughed the first, and pricked Olena with his bayonet. "She hasn't said anything yet, she's got to start talking first."

"Trust the captain. He'll get it out of her, if he has to tear her guts out to do it."

"That's it. Hey, you, get a move on!" yelled the first soldier again.

"Prod her a bit, prod her!"

The bayonet darted forward; little dribblets of blood ran down Olena's back.

"Come on, faster! D'you think you're going for a walk with your sweetheart?"

The soldiers cared nothing that their victim could not understand what they were saying—they simply enjoyed this shouting and swearing and yelling of obscene words. They themselves were weary and angry, the weather was growing colder and they had to be out here freezing in the cold instead of sleeping comfortably in their billets and all on account of this accursed bitch. They wanted to take it out of her for their own weariness, for their own sleepless night.

The night brought a frost so cruel that it seemed as if it reached right up to the heavens and froze up the moon into a clod of ice. In the silver moonlight the rainbow lost its colours and only a faintly visible streak remained in its place in the sky. Instead of it two iridescent columns grew out of the horizon, and rose on both sides of the lunar disc like the two pillars of a triumphal arch, sparkling and gleaming with silver rime and reaching from the distant heavens to the edge of the earth.

"Come on, you bitch!" the German soldiers shouted savagely. They did so not only because they wanted to shout, but because the night frightened them. They wanted to drown their fears in noise, to rend the veil of this mysterious calm, to introduce a familiar element into these terrible nocturnal hours. Never had the Germans seen such a night. It was as light as day. The moon shone dazzling white, filling the world with its silver glare. Pillars of light blazed and flashed in the sky. The snow sparkled with a blue radiance such as the Germans had never seen. It crunched loudly under their boots, sign of such a frost as the Germans had never before experienced and had never thought possible. The cottages stood grim and dark along the road. Not a soul was to be seen, but the cottages stared at the Germans with the orbits of their frozen windows, as if with living eyes, and

their shadows lay black across the road. The Germans would never have dared to come out on a dark moonless night. They knew that death was lurking for them round every corner, behind every bush, in every shadow—a death as sudden as lightning, too swift to ward off. To-night it was too bright for any ambush, and yet the hearts of the Germans contracted with fear. Every now and then they stopped dead, and looked around, straining their eyes to make out something in the shadow of the barn and shouting at the top of their voices to keep up their courage. The frost cut their cheeks and left a crust of ice on their lips, while they rubbed their ears with nervous haste, stamped their feet, and again drove the naked woman to and fro, to and fro, up and down the road.

Finally they grew tired of the joke. It was quite tedious really. Olena stumbled and fell more frequently, took longer to get up, but did not weep or cry out, nor did she express the slightest wish to see the captain and make a statement. Meanwhile the frost not only cut the faces, hands and feet of the soldiers, but hampered their breathing, hurt their throats, filled their eyes with tears and shook their bodies with uncontrollable tremors.

“Look sharp now, home, quick, at the double!”

They hustled Olena towards the barn with shouts and whistles as if they were driving cattle. At the door she stumbled over the threshold and fell face downward on the clay floor, instinctively shielding her distended belly with her hands. She felt a throbbing in her temples, her heart beat wildly. After a few minutes the merciless pincers of the frost gripped her. The wounds on her back—which she had hardly felt until now—began to burn like fire. With a superhuman effort she sat up and began to rub her shoulders, hips and thighs clumsily with her numb hands. The moonlight, shining through the cracks in the wall, ruled even stripes on the clay floor. A bundle of straw lay in one corner. Olena dragged herself to it, doubled up and burrowed into the straw.

“I shall freeze to death,” she said to herself and felt relieved at the thought.

Her sheepskin coat and shawl had been taken away that morning in the German officer's office. And to-night the soldiers had stripped her of all clothing, even her shift, before they drove her out into the snow. ‘Perhaps they have forgotten and left it all here in the barn,’ she thought and looked around. No, they had left nothing behind. Only the naked floor and this pitiful bundle of straw which now gave her a scant shelter.

It was very quiet outside. Apparently the soldiers had thought it unnecessary to leave a guard—they only locked the door and went away.

Olena's whole body was aflame. She could not sleep, she was even afraid of falling asleep, and watched with wide-open eyes the stripes of moonlight moving slowly across the floor.

Suddenly she heard a rustling. She strained her ears. The snow crunched, but not under the pacing of the sentry. Someone was approaching slowly and cautiously. The snow creaked faintly, then all was quiet, then the snow creaked again. Someone was creeping nearer, very carefully. Olena was frightened. What was this? Who could it be?

The noise ceased. It had surely been only her fancy. Then the creaking came again. There could be no doubt, someone was coming. She sat up expectantly. The sound came nearer. It was coming from behind the barn, on the side farthest from the door. When would the footsteps turn away? she asked herself. But they kept straight on. They grew ever slower, ever more cautious, and stopped at last at the very wall of the barn. Olena stiffened. Someone was standing outside the wall. She could hear breathing, then someone leant against the boards and peered through a crack.

She waited. Who was this? Friend, foe or chance passer-by? What passer-by could there be at night in a village where the penalty for being found outdoors after dark was death?

"Auntie!" whispered the voice of a child.

Olena stiffened. Beyond that wall stood a child. She wanted to reply, but could utter only a muffled groan.

"Auntie Olena!"

One of the neighbours' children had stolen out to the barn and was calling her. She groaned again.

"Auntie Olena, I brought you some bread."

Bread! She had had nothing to eat for two days. Not a crumb of bread, not a sip of water. Hunger was not so bad, but she was thirsty, had already been very thirsty while Werner was questioning her and later when they kept her locked in the barn. While they were driving her about out there in the snow she had managed to snatch a few handfuls of snow and put them in her mouth. The snow had refreshed her, moistened her dry mouth. But the soldiers had caught her at it and so she had to scrape up the snow with her lips every time she fell. Now she was feeling very hungry.

She calculated the distance between herself and the spot from where the boy was calling and gathered her strength.

"I am coming."

Cautiously she crawled along the cold floor, on her hands and knees—she could no longer stand up. Her back and legs ached unbearably, but still she crawled. Suddenly the silence was broken by a deafening report, followed by a shrill piercing cry. Olena lay still. It was some time before she understood that the noise had been that of a shot, somewhere quite near. She lay with open mouth, staring intently at the black wall, behind which something terrible was happening. She heard the crunching of heavy boots on the snow, German oaths and the sound of a rifle-butt on something soft. Another German came and now two of them swore and cursed in unison. Olena listened.

She listened for some other sound. But the shot had been evidently well aimed.

Suddenly her unbearable weariness, the pain of her hurts, all the torments of these last two days, broke in on her. She felt the earth sway and spin round under her and she sank into unconsciousness.

The sound of the shot and the cry carried far in the quiet of the night. They were heard only too clearly in the cottage next to the barn, where for the past hour three heads had been pressed against a window and three pairs of eyes had watched the dark outline of the barn through peep-holes thawed into the hoar.

Little Zina began to cry: "Mummy! Mishka! Mummy! Mishka!"

Malyuchikha squeezed her hand so hard that the little girl screamed with pain.

"Be quiet!"

"Mummy! Mishka! What have they done to him, Mummy?"

"Didn't you hear? They've killed our Mishka!" said the woman in a dull voice.

Eight-year-old Sasha came away from the window.

"Mummy, I'll go take some bread to Auntie Olena."

"You'll stay here. They will be watching now, right on until daylight," she replied sternly. After a short silence she added: "And anyway, we've got no more bread, not one bite. Mishka took the last crust."

Sasha went to the window again and looked out, but could see nothing.

Mishka was lying on his face in the lee of the barn wall. The bullet had entered his back under the shoulder-blade and passed clean through him. He could barely have had time to cry out. One of the German soldiers pushed the body with his foot. A crust of bread fell out of the little fist.

"He brought her bread, the little swinel!" the soldier said, and kicked the lifeless body once again. "Tried to feed the woman."

"He almost did it at that, the blighter. . . ."

"Another minute and she'd have had it. But I saw him as soon as we came outside, saw something crawling along the wall. So I took aim. . . ."

"Not a bad shot," his companion praised him, looking at the brown stain soaking through the grey wool of the homespun shirt.

"I should say so! Nothing wrong with my aim! What are we to do with him now? Leave him here?"

"No, we'd better throw him in the ditch."

They agreed that this was the thing to do. Each took the boy by one leg and dragged him along, letting the flaxen head bump over the clods of frozen earth. Then the soldiers lifted up the body, swung it and threw it into the roadside ditch.

"Let him lie there. Wonder where he came from?"

"The captain will find out to-morrow. Though it's a devil of a business to find things out here. The whole bunch sticks together and keeps mum."

"Don't worry, our captain will find their tongues for them."

"About time, too. I'm telling you straight, it's uncanny here."

The soldier, tall and thin, leaned on his rifle and glanced suspiciously at his comrade. But he was evidently reassured by the other man's round face and snub nose.

"Yes, uncanny! What *I* want is to go back home. My Michel will be ten this spring. I haven't seen him for two years, two whole years."

The other nodded in sympathy.

"I've been home on leave this autumn."

"When I left home," the other continued, "I promised to give him a bicycle as soon as I got back. The boy has been waiting two years now for his bicycle. It's difficult to send one from here."

"Why? Our sergeant sent two home."

"Sergeant?" said the tall one. "A sergeant is a sergeant. But they would never accept a bicycle for transport from a private. You know that as well as I do. Parcels are another matter, but you are not allowed to send bicycles home."

They were walking up and down in front of the Kommandantur. There was a light in the window. The office was still busy.

"What's the time now? We ought to be relieved soon."

"Half an hour to go yet!"

The cold was growing fiercer every minute. The taller of the two soldiers was tolerably warm; his head under the field service cap was wrapped in a woollen shawl. But the other man was rubbing his ears with a haste akin to despair.

"How can these people live here? Is it always as cold as this round here?"

"How should I know? Probably. But these savages don't seem to mind."

"Did you see the rainbow?"

"Yes."

"What can it mean?"

The tall one shrugged his shoulders.

"What could it mean? Simply that they get rainbows in winter round here."

"And those pillars of light. Just look!"

"That's from the frost."

"Perhaps the rainbow is from the frost too?"

"Quite possible," the smaller man agreed, blowing on his hands and looking round with a start.

"See anything?"

"No, I was just looking."

A minute later the tall one looked round too, and then swore angrily. They knew by experience that once you started looking over your shoulder you couldn't resist doing it again and again and then you got more and more frightened.

"What are you looking at? There's nothing there."

"Why, you're looking round yourself all the time."

"I always think someone is walking along the road. When you look there's nothing there, and yet you always think there is, again and again."

By tacit understanding they did not extend their sentry-go beyond a few paces to and fro in front of the Kommandantur.

Soon the door opened—it was the relief coming out.

"Who fired?" the sergeant asked.

"I," the tall soldier replied, drawing himself up. "An attempt was made to bring the prisoner bread."

"And then, Raschke?" The sergeant was interested.

"I shot him—it was a little boy. Must have been sent by the neighbours."

"Where is he?"

"We threw him in the ditch."

"Well, let's go and have a look."

The three men went back to the ditch.

"Just here," Raschke said, and pointed.

The sergeant bent over.

"Nothing here, Raschke."

"But there must be." Raschke was worried. "This is where we threw him in, isn't it, Franz?"

The two soldiers got down into the ditch and clambered clumsily to and fro.

"No use going as far as that. We never went all that way."

The sergeant scrutinized their faces with a frown of suspicion.

"Here, what's all this?"

"Sergeant, I can swear that we threw the brat down just here. Here is my witness, look," Raschke said, and pointed to a small bloodstain on the snow.

The sergeant shook his head and examined the spot.

"You've messed up all the evidence by getting into the ditch and trampling all over the snow. . . . A fine guard you must have kept. Somebody has pinched the corpse right under your noses. If so be there was any corpse at all," he added unpleasantly.

"Of course there was. We dragged him away by the feet."

"Maybe he was alive, you idiots, and cleared out when you left him."

"Oh, no! the bullet went right through him and he fell on his face. He was dead all right."

The sergeant walked along to the barn. A large stain discoloured the snow and beside it lay a crust of black bread. The track of a pair of childish feet showed clearly on an untouched hummock of snow.

"This is where it happened. And then we dragged him to the ditch here: you can see the marks."

"Yes."

The sergeant was convinced. It was obvious that the soldiers were telling the truth.

"Come on, you are under arrest."

The soldiers gaped.

"Under arrest?"

"Well, what is there to gape at? Was it your duty to guard this sector? It was. And yet on this your sector things happened without your knowing anything about it. The body of a criminal was stolen and you two idiots saw nothing. A fine watch you've kept! Why, with such a guard we could all be murdered in our sleep."

The soldiers followed the sergeant and hung their heads.

"This accursed place," murmured Raschke. His comrade heaved a sigh in reply.

"There was no one there, no one *could* have been there," Raschke insisted.

The smaller man, Vogel, was shivering with fear. He felt his hair stand on end with terror and an icy tremor ran down his spine. Raschke said there could have been no one and he was right. The snow had not creaked, there had been no sound, no shadow had glided over the snow in the bright moonlight. And yet the boy's body had disappeared. What could it all mean?

Private Vogel was afraid to answer his own question and involuntarily quickened his pace. He gave a sigh of relief when the door of a cottage opened at last, and heat, light and human voices streamed out to meet them, shutting out the ditch, the snow, the whole sinister night. For an instant he forgot that he was under arrest and felt happy to be among human beings. The night was defeated, conquered by the voices and the lamp-light. He felt safe, protected by the walls of the cottage.

"When the captain comes he will decide about you. Meanwhile stay here until morning," the sergeant said.

Raschke and Vogel sat down on the floor in a corner. It was warm and pleasant. Raschke leant his head against the wall and dropped into a doze. But the lice would not let him sleep. He scratched himself, half asleep, and then woke up completely and swore.

"One can't even sleep. While you're out in the cold the vermin keep quiet, but as soon as they feel the heat they get to work. . . ."

They both moved over to the stove, stripped and by the red light of the blazing logs began carefully hunting the lice in the folds and seams of their coarse linen shirts.

Malyuchikha was sitting on the floor, breathing hard. It had not been easy to crawl more than three hundred yards on her belly along the ditch. She had had to throw herself face downwards in the snow a hundred times to escape the eyes of the Germans. But she set her teeth. Come what may, she would not leave her child to lie in the ditch like a dead dog.

The way back was harder still. The body of her son, small as it was, weighed heavily on her back, slipped off sideways time after time and got in her way. She was almost exhausted when she reached the fence and climbed out of the ditch while the German soldiers were standing talking near the Kommandantur house. But now at last she was back in the cottage and little Misha straight and stiff was lying on the table. He was already

frozen hard as if he had been dead a long time. The other children stood around their brother. The moonlight, streaming in through the window, fell on his bright fair hair lying tousled around his face, and shone on his mouth, wide open after uttering his last cry. Zina cautiously touched a spot of blood on Misha's jacket.

"What's that?"

"Don't touch it," Sasha said sternly. "That is where they shot him, isn't it, Mummy?"

"Yes, my son, yes, there," the mother whispered hoarsely, combing the soft hair of Misha with her fingers. So he was dead. It was such a short while ago that he had taken the bread for Olena and cautiously tiptoed out of the cottage. She had been sure that he would be successful, that he would reach the barn without mishap. And now this.

"Misha shouldn't have gone," little Zina suddenly said in a petulant voice.

"Oh, yes, he had to go, little daughter, he had to go," the mother said.

"The Germans are not giving Auntie Olena anything to eat," Sasha explained in a low voice.

"That's it, son. Your Auntie Olena was with the guerillas with your daddy, and look how they are treating her. She will die, they will kill her, our Olena. . . ."

"Perhaps I could take her some potatoes. There were some left over in the pot from yesterday," Sasha growled angrily.

"No, sonny, no one could get to the barn now: they will be on the look-out. You'd only perish to no purpose. We were sure there was no one near the barn and yet they spotted our Misha."

"They wouldn't spot me," Sasha insisted.

"Sh-sh. If Misha couldn't get through, no one else can, no one, see."

Sasha said nothing. Malyuchikha looked at the face of her dead boy and gently stroked his hair.

"Where shall we bury him? In the morning they will start searching, and if they find him they'll take him away."

"We can bury him in the garden," suggested Sasha.

"How can we do that? They would hear us—and the earth is as hard as stone, we couldn't dig a grave—we could only cover him with snow."

At a loss what to do they stood around the table on which the dead boy lay.

"What shall we do?"

"We must bury him in here," whispered Malyuchikha.

"In the cottage?" Zina asked, surprised.

"Where else? At least he will lie in his own home, stay with us. There is nothing else to be done."

"Here, in this room?"

She looked around helplessly.

"No . . . we can do it outside the door."

They went outside, into the passage. It was narrow and there was little room. Malyuchikha looked at the clay floor.

"We'll dig here. Give me the spade, Sasha, it's behind the door."

She crossed herself, drew the outline of a grave and drove the spade in with her foot.

The earth was hard, trodden down by many feet for many years. The stubborn resistance of the soil defeated the spade. The woman tired quickly.

"You dig a little, Sasha. . . ."

The boy took the spade, and went to work with all his strength, putting his tongue out with the effort. Zina squatted down and cleared the earth away with her hands.

They dug a long time, relieving each other, stubbornly boring into the hardened soil. The top layer once pierced, the digging was easier. At last the shallow grave was ready.

"Children, we must dress him now. . . . He will have to lie in the earth without a coffin, our little Misha!"

She brought water and washed her little son's face, his bloody chest, his thin little back with the dark wound under the shoulder-blade. Then she took a clean shirt from the chest and eased it over the stiff arms.

Zina sobbed: "Poor Misha! What a funeral."

"Don't cry. Mishutka died like the Red Army men die, understand? He died from a German bullet, he died for the good cause."

Malyuchikha was talking to Zina, but she was saying the words to herself. Sobs rose into her throat and she was afraid that she would lose control of herself, that she would sink to her knees beside the body of her son and howl like an animal, so that the whole village might hear of her misfortune, of her sorrow, of the death of her son, whom she bore and nursed and loved for ten years and who had now been killed by a German bullet.

"His father said to him when he went away with the guerillas: 'See that you bring no shame on me here!' Mishutka did as his father told him: he did not disgrace us. Understand?"

"Ye-es," Zina sobbed.

"There is no call to cry. Mishutka will not lie easy if tears fall on his grave. No need to cry. Help me spread this cloth."

They spread a linen cloth in the pit, laid the dead boy on it and wrapped him up.

"This is to keep the earth out of his eyes," the mother said.

"So the earth shouldn't run into his eyes," Zina repeated in her high treble.

"Take a clod of earth, Zina, throw it on your brother," Malyuchikha said.

Zina squatted down, took a handful of brown clay and let it dribble on to the shroud. Sasha followed her. Then the mother shovelled the earth in with the spade. She filled in the pit until the white linen disappeared, then until the grave was level with the floor, then until a little mound rose over it.

"We must tread it down," she said, "or else it will show, and if the Germans came they would find it and dig him up."

The three of them trod down the grave, step by step, carefully, methodically. Malyuchikha thought that here she was, trampling on her son's grave, doing what no one ever did anywhere, what was contrary to all custom, contrary to her own heart. She was trampling on the bright hair of her son, on his bloody chest, on his thin childish arms and legs.

"There's no help for it," she said aloud in reply to her own thoughts, and little Zina repeated like an echo:

"There's no help for it."

"Will it do now?" Sasha asked.

"No, son, not yet. The earth is still soft, it still shows. Tread it down until it is quite level."

She carefully swept up the earth which had found no room in the grave, took it into the room and scattered it around the stove. She swept the passage again, in order to leave no trace of the grave, then scattered chips of wood and bits of straw about.

"Can you see anything?"

Sasha looked carefully. "No . . . and in the daytime, when the light is better, we can have another look."

Malyuchikha stood and gazed at the strange grave of her son, at the straw and chips strewed over it. Mishutka had vanished without a trace. Of course, children died sometimes. But they all had their little coffins and their little graves overgrown with green grass. But her Mishka had left no trace. He was lying in the cottage of his birth, but even she, his mother, would be unable to find his grave if she did not know where he lay.

"Go to bed, children," she said.

"And you?"

"I'm going to bed too. Morning isn't far off, we must sleep."

But she could not sleep. She was thinking of Mishutka and of Platon, her husband, out there with the guerillas. The army had rejected him—back in 1918 he had lost two fingers and was discharged. But the guerillas did not care how many fingers a man had and so he had joined the guerillas.

Platon would come home and ask where Mishka was. Mishka had always been his favourite. What could she tell him? "Mishutka is lying in the passage," she would have to tell him, "under the clay floor, with a German bullet in his heart."

And yet she knew quite well that Platon would receive the news calmly, would only repeat what he had said when the Germans entered the village and he went away with the others with his bundle over his shoulder, went away far into the forest where the guerilla band could hide. He said: "Keep your chin up, old girl. If need be, go for them with a stick, with an axe, with whatever you can find handy, but don't let them get away with anything. These are times when everybody must fight. Old men, women, even the children!"

Platon would say: "Well, our Mishka perished in the fight against the Germans. Don't cry, old girl, he died for his country, understand?"

So Malyuchikha did not cry but stared with wide-open eyes at the door beyond which, under the floor of the passage, she had hidden the grave of her son.

In the street the sentries were still discussing the events of the night.

"A devilish place. Who could have taken the brat? Raschke says they heard nothing. And yet the snow creaks if you so much as move a toe."

"Who knows?" the other soldier murmured gloomily. "You can't understand this place anyway."

And they looked around more and more often, thinking they heard the snow creak, thinking they heard footsteps, but whenever they looked there was nothing there. A shining disc of haze appeared around the moon. The pillars of light, columns of the triumphal arch, slowly faded out.

"Seems a bit warmer," one of the soldiers said.

"Warmer? Nonsense. I'm expecting my ears to drop off any minute now. While you're out in the open it's not so bad, but once you go inside and get warm, they burn like fire."

"Frostbite, that is."

"Of course it's frostbite. Same with my feet. When the thaw comes, they'll just rot off."

"So much the better for you, they'll send you to hospital."

"Oh, yeah? Did they send Mahler to hospital? And his feet are quite black, frostbitten."

"Well, you needn't shout so."

"There's no one here."

"That's what you think. But to-morrow the sergeant will know of every word you said."

"Not unless you go and tell him!"

"Better not say that again, or . . ."

"Don't fly off the handle like that. I just meant that miracles don't happen."

"No, of course not. But still, where did that body get to?"

"That's another matter. I was talking about the sergeant."

"But I am talking about the body."

The haze around the moon grew broader and more solid, standing out, a milky bluish-white disc, against the transparent sky.

"You can say what you like, the frost ought to increase towards morning, but it seems to be getting warmer instead of colder."

"I'm telling you, the weather is about to change, I can feel it in my bones."

"Rheumatism, eh?"

"Yes, of course. As soon as the weather changes, it aches and aches."

The two German soldiers paced up and down the street.

"By the way, that woman, is she still in the barn?"

"Yes."

"She'll freeze to death by morning."

"If the weather changes, she won't freeze."

"Lousy work, this. Womenfolk, little boys."

"Can't be helped. A woman of that sort would do you in as soon as look at you. And the little boys are even worse. They wriggle through everywhere and stick their noses where they're not wanted. The villagers send them here to spy on us."

They were silent for a while.

"I would handle them in a different way. Like the captain in that other village, you remember?"

The other man nodded.

"They'll never work for us anyway. I know them well. In the end we shall have to finish them off all the same, so why not straight away. We should be much safer."

"What? The lot of them?"

"The whole blessed lot. You can see for yourself what sort of people they are. Even the little children are spoilt: we could never re-educate them. It's all a waste of time. They are no use to us and never will be any use."

The other soldier sighed and said nothing. The light went out in the sky. The branches of the roadside trees rustled and scattered powdered snow on to the roadway. Clouds covered up the moon.

"Look, the weather is changing, as I said. The moon was as bright as the sun a minute ago and look at it now."

"A wind is rising."

"Good job that it's getting warmer. I've had enough of this frost—it's enough to kill a man."

The snow still crunched underfoot, but not as sharply as before. The weather was changing fast. A grey vapour dimmed the glassy clearness of the sky, the wind grew stronger and stirred up long swirls of snow in the fields. Icy blasts pierced the men to the bone, crept in under their thin coats, breathed into their faces.

"There's your warmer weather. . . ."

"How much longer?"

"Plenty of time left until morning."

A strange roar came suddenly from across the snow-covered plain and grew louder and nearer as they listened. As it reached the village it burst into a long-drawn howl. The trees bent to the gale and tossed their branches. The loose snow swirled over the ground, scattered into the air and fell back, a dry silver rain filling the air. The sentries could hardly move, they stood with heads bent to the storm. When the wind was in their backs, it was easy going and they glided along as if on wings, but the wind was veering round all the time, blowing now from the right, now from the left, tossing up high columns of snow, and dropping them suddenly, and it was impossible to keep backs to the wind.

"What a winter. Now we shall have another blizzard. You can't see anything in such weather."

Both turned suddenly on their heels as if at a word of command and looked over their shoulders. But the road was empty, as before.

III

"MY DARLING LOUISA."

Captain Werner raised his eyes from the letter he was writing and looked out of the window. A blizzard was raging outside.

It seemed as if the snow were hurrying past, but it was only the wind tossing up white clouds of snow, tearing them into flakes and scattering them over the bushes, rattling the panes of the windows and howling without respite. The gale raged over the wide white plains, beat the earth with its wings and stormed through the village so furiously that the cottages trembled and shook.

Kurt Werner's heart was drowning in sorrow and longing. In this breathtaking snowstorm, which cut him off from the world, and buried everything under snow as fine and dry as desert sand, he was thinking of his home in Dresden, of his wife and children there. He had not seen them for a long time. When his unit was being transferred from France he had hoped that he might manage to get home for a day.

But they had been bundled across Germany in inordinate haste and when they passed through Dresden no one had been allowed out of the station even for a few minutes. So he merely saw his native town from the window of a railway carriage and could do no more than look in the direction where his home lay. Now he was longing desperately to go home, if only for a short time, for half an hour, for only ten minutes. There would be no howling wind blowing there, and no constant and immediate threat of death lying in wait for him in frozen ravines. His family would be sitting around the table and drinking coffee. Louisa would be slicing bread. It would be warm and cosy. Louisa would smile and pour out his coffee with her plump little hands. When could he go back to all that at last?

Blind resentment against everything and everyone rose in him suddenly. He hated Pussy, who was always full of caprices, who slept until noon, who was always complaining about being bored, and who never even dreamt of making the bed or tidying up the room. He thought with repugnance of the tumbled bed, of the dirt on the floor, of the hair-curlers and nail-scissors strewn among the breakfast things on the untidy table. He thought with longing of the neat well-kept little flat in Dresden and of Louisa with her everlasting duster in her hands, cleaning it. . . . He hated his own clumsy, dull-witted, lousy, diseased, frost-bitten soldiers. And most of all he hated this village, where he had been marooned for more than a month now—this dark, secretive village where the people walked past him with their eyes fixed on the ground, where he knew that there was hatred in every heart and that whatever he might do to them he would never get what he wanted: fear and obedience.

"I'll show you yet!" he murmured between clenched teeth.

His eye fell on a clean sheet of paper and bent over the desk he began to write rapidly, so rapidly that his pen sputtered and scattered tiny drops of ink all over the paper.

'I am counting the days when I shall at last be reunited with you. We are advancing, Louisa, advancing all the time in this strange, savage, barbarous country. Our campaign will soon end with a complete victory.'

He wanted Louisa to be glad. No need to tell her that the unit had been standing on the same spot for a whole month. One miserable village made no difference, anyway. Nor did he want her to know that they were being tormented by this fearful, merciless cold; that guerillas were lying in wait for the Germans in every forest and every gully; that his men were growing weaker and more and more of them were sickening day by day; that of the unit which he had brought from France hardly a man survived and that of his Dresden friends only the one, Schacher, was still alive. No, she need not know all this, why should she? Letters from the front should be full of optimism, they should rouse and maintain patriotic feelings—particularly in view of the fact that before the letters reached Louisa they would be read by other people, and serve as a yardstick to measure Kurt Werner's loyalty.

'The winter here is terrible. We are not used to such frosts. But the words of the Führer keep us warm and we are proud of the opportunity to fulfil his great plans and serve Germany.'

He wrote a few more sentences, then re-read the whole letter from the beginning. Yes, that wasn't so bad—in fact, it sounded much better than the leaflets which were being sent from Germany for distribution among the soldiers—it was more manly, more convincing.

He reflected a little longer, chewing his pen, but decided that it would do as it was. After all, he had to save some space for questions about the children; he had to show that he was not only a captain, but a father and a husband as well.

'My darling, how are you managing? How is Lizzy? Did Willie get over his angina? I will try to send him some fur for a coat so that he won't catch so many colds. You wanted stockings but, worse luck, they are devilish hard to get hold of: we have seen nothing but villages up to now, but as soon as we take some larger towns I will try and send you a few pairs. Last week I sent you some butter. Please let me know whether you received it and all the other parcels. Next week I'll send you honey—it will be good for Willie's throat.'

There was a knock at the door.

"What is it now?"

"The headman is here, sir."

"Let him wait," Werner flung the words over his shoulder and bent over his letter again. But his thoughts were already diverted into another channel, from his snug Dresden home to this Ukrainian village, and he felt too irritated to go on with the letter. He ended it with kisses and greetings, signed it and hastily put it in an envelope.

"Well, where is the fellow? Bring him in!"

A tall man with a stoop appeared at the door.

"You sent for me, sir?"

"Yes, I did!"

Werner stretched his legs under the table and looked searchingly at the man standing before him.

"When will the grain delivery be ready?" he suddenly asked, bending forward quickly.

The headman started nervously and drew his head in between his shoulders.

"I am doing the best I can, sir, and more—but there isn't any grain."

"What? No grain? A village of three hundred cottages, a record harvest and no grain? They've hidden it, that's all!"

The headman heaved a sigh: "Sure they've hidden it."

And he pointed to the snowstorm raging outside.

"How can one search in this weather? And how can one find anything?"

"One can find it all right." The captain cut him short. "All you have to do is to look in the right place, Mr. Gaplik, and look in the right way. Sit down."

The headman sat down gingerly on the edge of a chair.

"I am dissatisfied with you, most dissatisfied. In fact, I can't understand for what purpose you were brought or sent here. I think it would have been better to have found a local man. Why, after a whole month you haven't even got to know the people here. Don't you know anyone at all in this village?"

A spark of satisfaction glinted in the eyes of the headman; he hastily agreed, nodding his little bald head: "Of course I don't know them. . . . It's a big village and no one will so much as pass the time of day with me. It would be easier for a local man, much easier."

The captain rocked in his chair.

"Ah-hum! So apparently you don't like your job very much, eh?" he asked craftily.

Gaplik twisted his cap about in his hand and remained silent.

"Well, if I were you I shouldn't forget that without us you would have been shot by the Red Army or, what is worse, the peasants would have done you to death with pitchforks. . . . You owe your life to the German authorities and you must obey their orders, especially as they are not asking much of you, are they?"

The mujik sighed.

"You are not sufficiently enthusiastic, you know. The Bolsheviks took your land away, and put you in prison. We thought you would do your best for us. But, in fact, you have done damn all. What my soldiers have succeeded in getting from the village, we have got—but as far as your efforts are concerned the result is nil. Not even information can we get from you."

"But didn't I inform you about this Kostyuk woman?"

Gaplik hoped to save himself by this one and only success—a piece of information which he had overheard by chance as he was skulking along the back alleys.

Werner frowned.

"All right. What else?"

"About the schoolmistress," murmured Gaplik.

"Oh, yes, the schoolmistress. You told us very little about her and even that little requires confirmation."

"It would be easier for a local man. . . ."

"Lay off with your local man! Of course it would be easier, but where can we find one? Three hundred cottages and three hundred families all belonging to the farm collective! Not a single individual farm. All the land comes from the gentry. All the people here—well, you know them as well as I do—were paupers, penniless, who have the Bolsheviks to thank for giving them the land. Most of them were day-labourers before the civil war—so where the hell can I find a loyal local man among them?" Werner was angry and banged the table with his fist. "You must wake up, Gaplik, and do your job or else I will have to take a different attitude with you. I'll give you three—or say four—days to get the grain. The army must be fed, the army is not going to starve in this damn' village just because you're incapable of handling the peasants."

"There's nothing I can do by myself," the headman said sullenly. "I must have military support."

"When have I refused you military assistance? If you need help, you'll get it from me, but you must do something yourself, think up some way. . . ."

The headman's little eyes brightened.

"Very good, sir, I will think out a plan and report to you."

"All right, only don't be too long about it. Remember, you've only got four days. Yes, and about that brat. The culprits will have to be found, or I will make you responsible. I'll give you four days for that too."

Werner turned his back on Gapiik and looked out of the window. The storm was still raging outside, the snow was whirling in clouds and the house creaked and groaned as if it were about to break into pieces. Gapiik realized that the interview was at an end. He bowed low to the square back of Captain Werner and left the room.

Not until he was out in the open did he dare to replace his cap on his head. He walked along, drawing his head in between his shoulders and diffidently racking his brains to find a means of extorting sufficient grain from the stubborn villagers. He was so lost in thought that in the dense flurry of snow he nearly collided with a man going in the opposite direction. He jumped back in terror. The other, a grey-haired old man, started to apologize, then, recognizing him, deliberately spat on the ground and turned off into the street leading towards the cottages.

Gapiik hurried home, got a sheet of paper out of a drawer and began to write out the draft of an order. He put his head first on one side, then on the other, scratched with his pen, struck out what he had written, sighed, sweated and rubbed his bald head. He was put off by the howling of the wind outdoors, and even more by the persistent memory of the stern words of the captain and the no less unpleasant memory of the attitude of the villagers towards himself. He knew very well that this was his last chance, that he would at all cost have to please Werner, who in his turn had at all cost to break the resistance of the villagers.

The village lay quiet and silent in its shroud of flying snowflakes driven by the gale. The villagers sat in their cottages listening to the howling of the snowstorm. Only old Yevdokim Okhabko was so tormented by loneliness that he decided to visit his neighbours, blizzard or no blizzard. Fighting hard against the raging wind, he pulled himself along by the fence of the Malyuk house and carefully shook the snow from his boots on the threshold of the cottage. Inside all was quiet. Yevdokim knocked at the door and opened it without waiting for a reply. Three pairs of eyes, glazed with terror, stared at him as he entered.

"Good evening."

Malyuchikha drew a deep breath. Her heart was beating furiously.

"It's you, is it, Grandfather Yevdokim?"

"Can't you see? What frightened you so?"

She made no reply. He stood still, leaning on his stick.

"Aren't you going to ask me to sit down? That's something new, that is."

"Better not sit down in our house, better not come here at all," she said in a low voice.

"Why?"

She shrugged her shoulders. The old man flapped his hand and sat down on the window-seat.

"What's the matter with you, Galya, are you daft? Why are you sitting there like that? And where's Mishka?"

Little Zina suddenly set up a loud howl.

"What's wrong now?"

"Hush, Zina, don't cry," her mother said sternly.

Yevdokim scratched his head.

"It's blowing so hard, and it shook the house so, I got tired of sitting alone. I thought I'd go and sit with the neighbours."

"We're not much use as neighbours, Grandfather," Malyuchikha sighed.

Yevdokim put his chin on his hands clasped over the crook of his stick and looked at the woman attentively.

"Has something happened here? And where is your Mishka? Surely he's not wandering about in such a blizzard?"

"Mishka has gone, Grandfather . . ."

"Gone? Where?"

"Nowhere. . . . The Germans shot Mishka to-night."

The old man looked up.

"They—shot—Mishka? Woman! What are you saying?"

Malyuchikha wrung her hands till the joints cracked.

"Didn't you hear the shot? He went to the barn with some bread for Olena and they shot him. . . ."

She read a question in the old grey eyes.

"No, I didn't leave him to the Germans. I took him out of the ditch—carried him home on my back. We buried him, no one can find him now."

"Do they know who it was?"

"How should they? They killed him and threw him in the ditch like a dog. They're bound to look for him later, but not yet. When you knocked, I thought it was them."

The old man shook his head.

"So that's it. How many of our people perish. Children, even. . . . You, Sashka, remember it . . . never, never forget."

The boy nodded silently.

"When your father and the others come, tell them everything, everything, you understand?"

"As if they didn't know enough as it is?" the woman said drily.

"Of course they know. They have seen plenty with their own eyes. But still, this is different. . . . Before this, your Platon was taking revenge on them for others, but now he will have to take revenge for Misha, for his own flesh and blood."

"That won't make any difference," Malyuchikha said quietly.

"Of course, of course, it won't. But still—a son is a son. The Germans killed mine in the year eighteen. I remember much against them, but that more than anything else. The nearer the heart, the worse the hurt. I was left behind like a stale crust—no use to anyone. If it had been different, there would have been grandchildren and the cottage not so lonely."

"The whole village are your grandchildren, Grandfather."

"Yes, so they are in a way, but your own flesh and blood is different."

"Sh! Listen! They're beating the rail, that means a meeting. . . ."

Malyuchikha grew pale.

"That will be about Mishka for sure."

The old man flapped his hand.

"Perhaps about Mishka and perhaps about something else. Plenty of other things they can think of."

The banging on the rail went on.

"Well, we must go to the meeting, they'll come and fetch us else. Coming, Grandfather?"

"Can't be helped. We must go," Yevdokim said, and stood up, leaning heavily on his stick.

"You, Sasha, stay here, don't go out of the house, look after Zina. As soon as it's over, I'll be back."

They slowly trudged along the road through clouds of powdery snow swirling in the air. The doors of cottages on both sides of the street opened as they passed and women, girls and old men came out.

"What is it, do you know?"

"How should I know? I know just as much as you. I heard them bang on the rail, so I came along."

"Oh, Lord, what will it be this time?" a woman sighed.

"Stop that groaning," Fedossya Kravchuk replied sternly. "Before you know what it is you start sighing and groaning. . . ."

"But surely it is something bad, my dear."

"Were you expecting something good from them then? How d'you make that out? A lot of good you must have seen them do, if you expect good things from them now."

"That's just it."

"Still, no use crying out before you're hurt. Or afterwards, either," Fedossya said.

No one replied. They all knew about Vassya. They knew why those deep lines had appeared at the corners of Fedossya's mouth. She certainly had the right to tell anyone that this was no time for sighs—no one had ever heard her complain, although she had not even that spark of hope to sustain her which consoled all the others: the hope that their sons and husbands in the army or in the guerilla bands were alive and would come back to them after that glorious hour when the last German would fall dead, killed in the village by a Red Army bullet.

More and more dark muffled shapes appeared through the curtain of snow. The villagers were gathering from all directions at the schoolhouse. They still called it that from habit. It was a roomy building, with large windows, high ceilings and white tiled stoves. The rooms were large and cheerful. But it was no longer a school. The Germans had chopped up the desks and forms for fuel, ripped the maps from the walls, smashed the cupboard containing all the accessories, torn up the pictures and portraits. The large class-room was cold and empty. This was where meetings were held and now a grey crowd of women and old men filled it to the doors.

Malasha Vyshneva alone stood aloof, as if an invisible boundary separated her from the crowd, a boundary no one wanted to cross. Deadly pale, wild-eyed, she stood near the wall and stared fixedly at nothing. Strands of dark hair had escaped from under her shawl, but she made no effort to smooth them back.

The platform, which had survived the German invasion, was now occupied by Gaplik behind a little table. A German sergeant, sitting next to him, yawned and stared indifferently at the meeting.

"Is everybody here?" Gaplik asked. He scrambled to his feet behind the table, his small bald head balancing insecurely on his long neck on top of his long thin body.

"Yes, all present," someone muttered near the door.

The headman picked up a sheaf of papers lying on the table, then put it down again and turned the pages over with hands that trembled slightly.

"The baldhead is afraid of something," someone whispered in the crowd.

"He must have cooked up the dirtiest trick the world has ever seen, that's clear. . . ."

"Of course he's scared; he knows very well that when our boys come back they'll skin him alive."

"Or else we ourselves might give him some attention even sooner. We'd soon cure him of wanting to be headman."

"How do you think you'll attend to him?" asked lame old Alexander, who looked after the horses on the collective farm.

"Don't you worry. We know how!" Frossya, a tall good-looking girl replied smartly.

"Silence! Who is talking there? The meeting is open!" Gaplik shouted angrily, and ran his eye over the crowd.

"I can't see anything open about it," muttered Yevdokim.

"What are you grouching about? His nibs the headman has been pleased to arrive and his master is here as well; what more do you want?" someone cried in reply.

"Shut up!" roared Gaplik, his voice hoarse with fury. "How many more times must I call for silence? Stop that whispering!"

"Hush, women, be quiet, let's listen to his story," Terpilikha intervened, and blew her nose noisily.

Gaplik cleared his throat, raised the sheaf of papers to his eyes, took a pair of wire-framed spectacles from his pocket and put them on. .

"Whew!"

"He's going to read it off a paper. . . ."

"A new ukase, you can see that!"

The headman glanced at the crowd over the top of his spectacles. Silence fell. He cleared his throat a second time and began to read in a thin, shrill voice: "The inhabitants of this village have not yet delivered the tax in kind demanded from them, that is to say, the grain."

A murmur rose from the hall and quickly died down.

"I warn you that the term for the delivery of the grain expires three days after the publication of the present announcement."

The crowd muttered.

"Whoever fails to fulfil this obligation towards the mother-country and the German army within three days, will . . . be subject . . ."

Gaplik paused in his reading and stared at the crowd with an air of triumph. At last there was complete silence and all eyes were fixed on him.

"Will be subject . . . in accordance with the provisions regarding non-compliance with the orders of the authorities, sabotage, active and passive resistance . . ."

"We know all that," someone said loudly in a particularly calm and contemptuous tone.

The German sergeant stood up and, craning his neck, scrutinized the corner from which the voice had come. But the villagers all stood quietly, their eyes fixed on the headman.

" . . . will be subject," Gaplik raised his voice, almost choked with malice, " . . . will be subject to the death penalty."

He drew a long breath, paused for a few seconds, then read the date of the order, the signature of Captain Werner and folded up the papers.

"Have you all heard?"

"Yes, all."

"Have you understood?"

"And how!" Terpilikha said from her place just in front of the platform. "We understood it very well indeed."

Gaplik glanced at her suspiciously. But she looked him calmly in the eye, with a serious and severe expression on her face.

"Well, that's settled then."

The crowd shifted and a few people were already at the door.

"Stop! Where are you going?"

"Isn't it over yet?"

"There is one more matter to discuss," the headman said sternly, and Malyuchikha felt her heart tremble and then start to race in senseless terror.

"The matter on hand is, that . . . "

The peasants waited, tense.

"During the night someone attempted to smuggle bread to an arrested criminal . . . "

Malyuchikha gripped the hand of Chechorikha, who was standing beside her, and who looked round at her in surprise.

"What's the matter?"

"Nothing . . . nothing . . . "

Still gripping Chechorikha's hand, she gasped for breath.

"The attempt was made by a boy aged ten or thereabouts. . . . "

The crowd stirred uneasily. People whispered and eyed one another.

"Silence! A boy about ten years old. The culprit was shot."

Chechorikha looked questioningly at the deathly pale face of Malyuchikha—then hastily gripped her hand and gently stroked the fingers which were clutching hers.

"Hold on to yourself, woman! Else he might notice something!" she whispered in Malyuchikha's ear.

But Gaplik was not looking at her. He read on with a nasal drawl: "The dead body of the young criminal was purloined and hidden by unknown evildoers. Whoever knows anything about

the identity of the criminal or of those guilty of the abduction of the body should report to the German Kommandantur with a view to making a statement."

Gaplik raised the paper closer to his eyes, glanced at the sergeant sitting next to him and coughed. The sergeant stood up, pushed his way through the crowd, which fell back for him, and looked out into the lobby. All those standing in the hall could see soldiers armed with rifles standing outside, their bayonets gleaming. The villagers looked at each other and the whispering and murmuring ceased abruptly.

" . . . In the interests of law and order, and with the object of ensuring the capture of the criminals, the German Kommandantur has decreed . . . "

The peasants waited numbly expectant.

"That the following inhabitants of the village shall be arrested as hostages . . . "

All heads bent forward. Yevdokim put his hand behind his ear to hear better.

"Palanchuk, Olga . . . "

A young girl near the door staggered. Her mouth opened as if she were about to cry out, but no sound came.

"Okhabko, Yevdokim . . . "

Yevdokim looked in astonishment at the people standing near him.

"Who?"

"Okhabko, Yevdokim," Gaplik repeated with emphasis, and went on: "Grokach, Osip . . . "

A sturdy peasant with only one leg nodded glumly.

"Chechor, Maria . . . "

Malyuchikha let go of her neighbour's hand and gazed at her in terror.

"It's all right, Galya, don't worry. You'll look after my little ones, won't you," Chechorikha said quietly.

"Vyshneva, Malanya . . . "

Not a muscle moved in the girl's face at the sound of her name. She remained motionless, staring at nothing.

It suddenly occurred to the headman that the same hostages might serve to obtain the grain as well. Shooting was all very well in its way, but there might be some people who, though not afraid to die, would hesitate to sacrifice the life of a neighbour. He had seen such things before. So on his own responsibility (for after all who would start checking up as to what had and what hadn't been agreed with the Germans) he announced: "If the culprits are not found within three days and if the delivery

of grain does not begin within three days, the hostages will be hanged."

There was a movement in the crowd and a low murmur arose.

"Is that all—can we go now?" Fedossya Kravchuk asked suddenly.

The crowd heaved one great sigh and all felt a wave of relief.

"The meeting is closed. Kindly disperse, with the exception of those whose names I have read out."

The peasants filed out through the door one by one. The five hostages lined up in front of the table without waiting to be told. The villagers walked past them, some with bent heads, others looking them straight in the eyes.

The school-room emptied quickly, but the villagers did not disperse. They stood about in the street, in the snowstorm, as if waiting for something more. Gaplik came out with the sergeant, after him came the five hostages escorted by the soldiers with fixed bayonets. Chechorikha and Olga Palanchuk walked with their arms round each other. Yevdokim marched along on his own, hitting the ground smartly with his stick at every step. They passed slowly through the silent crowd. Suddenly Chechorikha turned round.

"Never mind this! Don't give in! Don't think of us! Hold out!" she cried in a clear strong voice.

One of the soldiers roughly pushed her with his clenched fist. She staggered, then drew herself up and walked on, her head defiantly thrown back.

The crowd dispersed slowly in sullen silence. Gaplik almost broke into a run in his anxiety to keep up with the long strides of the German sergeant. Nothing in the world would have induced him to stay behind now. This had actually been the first time since his appointment to the office of headman that he had finally burnt his boats, announcing orders so intimately concerning the village. He recalled the faces of the villagers and a cold shiver ran down his spine. But he was even more terrified of the German captain, remembering his threat of that morning, that he would deal with him, Gaplik, unless he got results. The village was just a village, a crowd of women, children and old men. But Captain Werner was the representative of German might and his words were backed by rifles and bayonets. At first Gaplik had manoeuvred and evaded issues, but now he realized that further evasion was impossible and that a bitter fate was in store for him. He cursed the day and hour when he joined the Germans on their retreat from Rostov. He ought to have simply gone into hiding, waited a bit and then

moved on to some other district. He could have managed to scrape a living somehow. In war-time it would not have been so easily discovered that it had been he and no other who had welcomed the Germans in his village and showed them the safe way through the swamps.

'The Germans will win,' he tried to reassure himself, but found little consolation in the thought as long as he had to go on living in this village where three hundred families hated him from the bottom of their hearts and where each of the three hundred cottages might be sheltering a murderer who would not hesitate an instant if the opportunity offered to deal him, Gaplik, a mortal blow.

He heaved a sigh and entered the Kommandantur to make his report on the meeting.

The peasants also dispersed to their homes. Malyuchikha walked along more dead than alive after her fright. The earth swayed under her feet and her heart contracted painfully.

Sashka was playing with Zina, laying out bits of wood for her in front of the stove. She looked at the bright heads of the children and the pain in her heart grew even sharper.

"Well, children. Has Zina been good?"

"Very good. . . . Is the meeting over?"

"Yes. I must just go over to the Chechors, I'll be back soon. . . ."

"Why must you go to the Chechors?"

"The Germans have arrested Chechorikha; we must bring the children here," she said stolidly. Sasha looked up from his game.

"Arrested her? Why?"

"Don't you know the Germans yet?" his mother replied curtly—and went out. Very soon she returned with the three Chechor children. The eldest was eight years old, the same age as Sasha.

"Mummy! Mummy!" three-year-old Nina screamed at the top of her voice.

"Don't cry. Your mummy will come presently," Malyuchikha assured her. "Sit down; I'll get you something to eat."

She got out some potatoes from under the stove where they had been hidden, washed them carefully and put them on to boil in their jackets, so as not to lose the least little crumb. Apart from these potatoes and a small quantity of rye hidden in the loft there was no food in the house. The grain, the potatoes, the bacon, and the little barrel of honey were all inaccessibly buried in earth holes far from the cottage, frozen in and covered with snow.

"You must eat potatoes; there is nothing else. We'll bake bread when our men come back, and not before."

"Only potatoes!" Zina grumbled.

Malyuchikha pounced on her.

"What more do you want? You ought to be thankful to get anything to eat at all. Picking and choosing . . ."

She looked angrily at her little daughter and her eye fell on the child's thin arms and the pitiful puckers at the corners of its mouth. An aching pity welled up in her heart.

"It's no use crying. When our men come back everything will be different. We'll bake bread, spread honey on it, and you can eat as much as you like. But now you must be satisfied with potatoes."

"Of course, we must be satisfied if we have potatoes," Sasha said gloomily, and Zina hurriedly repeated after him: "Of course we must be satisfied . . ."

Malyuchikha lit the stove, and talked to the children, but could not master her growing alarm. She dropped everything, forgot what she had been wanting to say, gave Zina potato peelings instead of potatoes, spilt the water. The children stared at her in surprise.

"What's wrong, Mother?" Sasha asked finally. She looked at her son and felt frightened.

"Nothing, sonny, nothing. What should be wrong?"

"Does your head ache?"

"Headache? Yes, of course." she seized on this excuse.

"Yes, I have a bad headache."

"It's the meeting made your head ache," Sasha decided seriously.

"Yes, maybe it was the meeting. It was very stuffy, there were so many people there. That must be the reason."

The children accepted this explanation and turned to their own concerns. Malyuchikha washed the dishes and watched the children playing near the stove. Her hands were cold and her heart was bursting with emotion. Three dark heads, three-year-old Nina, five-year-old Osska, eight-year-old Sonya. Just babies. And Chechor himself in the army. Her agitation grew, it burned her, gnawed at her heart. Ever more often she went to the window and looked out.

"Somebody there?"

"No, sonny, there is no one, but I must go out now; I'll be back soon."

"You always go away and go away," Zina complained, preparing to cry.

"Sh—sh! I must go and I'm going," Malyuchikha said angrily.

"Take your shawl," Sasha reminded her, seeing her going to the door in her thin blouse and skirt.

It was quite a long way to the Grokhach cottage. The blizzard blew the hard little flakes of snow in Malyuchikha's face. They cut into her cheeks like bits of glass. The wind took her breath away and she arrived exhausted at the Grokhach house. She paused at the door, telling herself that she must not go into the cottage so out of breath. But in reality she wanted to postpone the terrible moment when she would have to look the Grokhach family in the face. They were probably sitting there in their orphaned cottage and weeping—the wife and two children of Grokhach, who was as good as swinging in a noose already.

But what she heard was the swishing sound of a saw, not weeping, and she was surprised. Who could be working at the Grokhach's on such a day?

Grokhach's wife and her eldest daughter, tall black-eyed Frossya, were sawing logs by the woodshed and were no less surprised at the sight of Malyuchikha. In those days visitors were few and far between. The villagers mostly sat in their cottages and waited for the next thing the Germans would spring on them.

"I would like a word with you, neighbour."

"Why not?" The other woman straightened up. "Come into the house."

Inside the house Malyuchikha looked at the youngest Grokhach daughter sitting on the window-seat.

"I should like to be alone with you."

"Alone?" her hostess asked with some surprise. "What is it all about? Well, if that's what you want, go, Lida, do a bit of sawing outside so we can have a chat."

The girl folded the shirt she was mending, stuck the needle into the coarse linen and went out without a word. Her eyes were swollen with tears.

Malyuchikha sat down on the seat and nervously kneaded her hands. Grokhach's wife watched her in silence.

"There's a blizzard outside!" she said at last.

"Yes," said Malyuchikha, and again there was silence.

Grokhach's coat was hanging from a nail on the wall above the bed. One pocket was torn, there were patches on the chest and on the back. One button was hanging on a thread. A working man's coat.

"What did you want to tell me?" Grokhach's wife asked finally.

Malyuchikha looked at her with desperate eyes.

"They've taken your man," she whispered.

The other woman frowned.

"Yes, they've taken him. What can you do? They just take our men. Perhaps it won't be as bad as it might. Is that what you came to say?"

"Yes, that and something else."

"What can anyone say about that? At first it gave me such a stab in the heart I thought I would fall down there and die. But then I came home and said to myself: 'you had better start doing some work and then you'll feel better.' So we sawed wood with Frossya. You can't knock a hole in a stone wall with your head and what's the good of sitting and crying. To-day it's my Osip, to-morrow it's another man—if it goes on much longer, none of us will be left alive anyway, that's certain. They'll kill us all, one after the other."

"But perhaps it won't go on much longer?"

"I said 'if.' But nothing much seems to be going on just now. At the slightest noise I imagine I hear shooting, hear our boys coming. How long has it all been going on? Only a month and it seems more like a year. So many people have perished! . . . When the headman read out my man's name he looked at me. I thought to myself: 'you're looking at me, are you, waiting for me to cry; well, you can wait a long time! Never will I cry in front of you, you son of a bitch. But the time will come when *you* will cry, when you will weep tears of blood! Village women are a stubborn lot, and you'll never beat them'."

"Neighbour!"

"Well, what is it?"

Malyuchikha got up from the seat and bowed low, almost to the ground, before Grokhach's wife.

"What's the matter with the woman, is she crazy? What are you doing?"

"Neighbour, it was my Mishka the Germans killed last night."

"Mishka?"

"It was I who dragged him out of the ditch and buried him. It is because of me that your man and those others were taken by the Germans."

She was trembling all over and her legs were failing her. But she felt relieved. She had said what she had come to say.

Grokhachikha bent forward and asked: "Why do you tell me all this? Why need anyone know?"

Malyuchikha didn't understand.

"Why tell you? When it's your man that's been taken. I'm telling you I must go and tell the German captain all about it, so he'll let the others go."

Grokhachikha jumped up from the seat.

"What's the matter with you, woman? Have you eaten henbane? Go to the Germans! You must be off your head!"

"I must tell them how it all happened. Those others aren't to blame."

"And you? Are you to blame? Ought you to have left them your boy, or what? I can't make you out, woman. Are you peasant stock or not? Or are you the sort the headman likes. All he has to do then is to lock up five people and he can find out anything he wants to know. Don't you see what would be the end of that, you silly bitch? Do you want to show them the way, put a weapon in their hands against us? Suppose you give yourself up to-day, and something happens to-morrow, something they don't like, why, they would arrest not five but fifty! Use your head, woman. None of us have ever thought of going to the Germans: do you want to be the first?"

"But people are locked up because of me. Because of me they'll . . ."

"Not because of you! Because of our misfortune, because of the war, because of the Germans! They killed Mishka! The Herods, to shoot children!"

Malyuchikha stood aghast.

"So you think . . ."

"I think nothing! There is nothing to think! You go home, woman, and don't say a word to anyone. They're all our people here, but why lead people into temptation? No one need know of such matters. It's our tongues are our worst enemies. Go home, do your work and don't be crazy!"

"But your man!"

"Look at the woman! Is he your man or is he mine? If I can sit tight and hold my tongue so can you. What will be, will be. If it's his fate to be killed, they'll kill him. If not, he'll stay alive. And if it comes to that, rather than live under the Germans, the sooner we die the better."

"We shan't live under the Germans for ever."

"My girl, if I thought we would, d'you think I'd wait any longer? I'd get me a rope and a nail straight away! But there's one thing I know—it's difficult for us now, but presently it will be their turn! And what a turn!"

Her face flamed, her eyes blazed with a joyful fire.

Malyuchikha sighed.

"You've turned all my thoughts upside down in my head!"

"No, it was before you came to me that they were upside down. What you've got to do is to think, not only of yourself, but of us all. If you think of us all you will see that you have no right to tell the Germans. You have no right to go and put your neck into the German noose of your own accord. Let them torture us, hang us, shoot us to their heart's content—all they can do to us is nothing really. A few of us will die, but they can't kill us all. All we need do is to hold out until our people come back, and we must hold out by hook or by crook."

Malyuchikha nodded distractedly. She felt strangely weak—all her strength had left her suddenly. She wanted to sit down, not on the seat, but on the floor, and weep, weep bitter tears. Weep for Mishutka, for Grokhach, for the three little innocents she left in her cottage with Sasha to look after them; for Vassya Kravchuk lying in the snow in the gully; for young Paschuk who was shot in that gully, because he tried to bury the dead; for the lad on the gallows; for the whole village; for those who fought for the village and had to retreat before the tanks of the enemy and whom the village had not seen for a whole month now.

"Here, take yourself in hand or you'll be no use to anybody," her hostess said angrily.

Malyuchikha thereupon took her leave. She did not want to talk to Lida and Frossya who were sawing wood in the yard. Her head was in a whirl from the scolding of Grokhach's wife. So that was what she was like, this Grokhachikha who, as everybody knew, was a shrew, who liked to scold and shout at people and never had a good word for anybody. So this was what she was really like.

At home Sasha played with the children, building a farm out of little sticks and putting cows and horses into the stables and cowsheds. Even little Nina stopped crying and was busy playing.

"What shall we put here?"

"Sheep, those new ones that were brought."

"Uh-hum."

"Give me some bits of charcoal. The sheep will be black. I want more bits. There are lots of sheep to do."

"Where's the cat?" Nina demanded.

"The cat's out walking, cats are always out of doors." Zina explained and Nina agreed.

"The Germans are coming, we must drive the cattle away!" Olya declared resolutely.

"All right, who'll drive them?"

"I will," offered Nina.

"And I'll stay behind with the guerillas," Olya said. "Come on, let's drive the herds away."

They pushed away the chip which represented the gate and brought the whole wealth of the collective farm, all the white sticks and black bits of charcoal out into the open country.

"Where shall we drive them?"

"Into the interior," Sasha said seriously. "Across the river. Our men won't let the Germans get beyond the river."

"But they may bomb us on the river," Olya objected.

"No, we'll cross by night," Sasha decided. "Give me that board, that can be the river."

The door opened noisily. Five pairs of eyes turned to it from the stove. Sasha grew pale.

On the threshold stood a German soldier. His red-rimmed eyes looked at the children from under a cloth wrapped round his head. He was covered with snow. Looking around and seeing no adults, he addressed the five children beside the stove. At first Sashka was nonplussed. He was sure it was about Misha, that everything had been discovered, that his mother had been taken and that the newcomer in the greenish coat would immediately start digging up his brother's grave in the passage. The soldier had to repeat his words many times before Sasha understood the distorted word 'mlek, mlek.'

"We have no milk," Sasha replied bluntly.

The soldier persisted: "Mlek, give mlek."

Sasha got up and without a word went out into the passage. Under his feet he felt the grave of his brother, he felt dead Misha lying in the earth. The soldier followed the boy's movements with his eyes. Sasha opened the door of the cowshed and showed the German that it was empty. How could it be anything but empty when the very first day of their arrival the Germans had led out their cow and slaughtered her in front of the house of their commander.

The soldier peered into the empty shed. There was a little straw on the floor and a smell of cow, but the manger was empty and covered with hoar frost. It was obvious that there was no milk to be had here.

Meanwhile Zina had set up a desperate howl inside the cottage. Mummy was away and now Sasha had gone with a German to the shed and she was frightened. Nina, always ready to cry, joined in.

The soldier came back to the room and looked at the children with a meaningless smile.

"Don't cry," he said in German, and grinned, showing a row of rotten, blackened teeth.

Zina screamed even louder. The German raised his rifle and took aim. Sasha leapt forward desperately, shielding his sister with his body. He spread out his arms wide and looked straight into the diseased, reddened eyes peering at him from under the field-service cap wrapped round with rags.

"Hoh-ho," the soldier laughed and turned his rifle towards little Nina. Nina did not understand what was going on, but she stopped crying and stared round-eyed at the strange man, the German. Even she understood that this was a German.

"I'll shoot you," the soldier said. Nina did not understand the words, but she felt that something terrible lay hidden in them. Zina also stopped crying. Sasha followed the black opening of the barrel with his eyes.

The black opening was held low and pointed now to the one, now to the other little head.

Suddenly Sasha thought: what if I jumped for it, seized the rifle? How does one shoot out of it? And what would happen afterwards, when the German was dead? And most important of all, would it be possible to get the rifle away from him?

The German smiled, showing his bad teeth. He liked this little joke, the terror in the eyes of the children, the pallor of their cheeks, the tension on the face of the eldest. Sasha began to understand that the German was just playing with them. Playing, like a cat with a mouse. Yes, the soldier was clearly playing. The black muzzle of the rifle rose and fell. Sasha would have liked the German to shoot at last, to finish with them and have done with it.

He thought the German would kill him first, as being the eldest, and he looked fixedly down the barrel of the rifle. Let him shoot, the sooner the better.

Finally the soldier tired of his joke. He laughed once more, shouldered his rifle and went out without looking back. The children sat numb, staring at the door. Sasha waited—maybe the German was only hiding behind the door, maybe he was only waiting for one of them to move, then he would open the door and shoot. Even Nina sat motionless as if turned to stone. Then came the sound of footsteps—footsteps in the passage. The door flew open—it was their mother.

Only then did the children relax. Zina screamed hoarsely.

Nina cried with big tears, Olya and Sonya cried too. Only Sasha stood silently in front of his mother.

"What is this? What happened?" she asked, terrified.

"Nothing. A German has been here," Sasha replied.

"A German? What did he want?"

"Nothing. He wanted milk."

"Well, what then?"

"I showed him that we had no cow."

"Did he go away?"

"Yes, he went away."

"What are you all yelling for then. He's gone and it's over.

Or did he beat you?"

"No, he didn't beat us," Sasha replied grimly. Malyuchikha, reassured, went outside to shake the snow off her shawl.

"What a blizzard! And no signs of it abating yet."

A distant suppressed cry came from the barn.

"What's that?"

"Nothing. Olena is having a baby," Malyuchikha replied, frowning.

The children listened. A long-drawn suppressed scream came from the direction of the great barn. It rose and fell, ceased for a while and returned with increasing intensity.

IV

THE DETENTION ROOM WAS A CLOSET OPENING OFF THE Commandant's office. Four walls and a bare floor. At one time there had been a set of library shelves here and a cupboard containing the documents and account-books of the village soviet and of the collective farm.

The walls of the old house were built of huge logs. The Germans had boarded up the windows and it was dark. The only light came from a crack in the door leading to the German guardroom where a lamp was burning.

The five prisoners heard the key turn in the lock once—twice—then they were plunged into a darkness hemmed in by four walls. There were no benches or stools, nothing to sit on. Their eyes slowly became accustomed to the darkness and they settled down on the floor beside the wall. Grokhach lay down on the bare floor and put his fist under his head for a pillow; soon the others could hear him breathing with the regular rhythm of sleep.

But the others could not sleep. Olga Palanchuk was sitting close to Chechorikha. She was afraid, afraid of this room, afraid

of the dark, afraid of the light beyond the door, afraid of what was to come. Chechorikha put her arm around her and so they sat, huddled close to each other.

Only Malasha kept away from all the others. She sat down in a separate corner, put her arms round her knees, set her back against the wall and stared with wide-open eyes into the dark. She was not thinking of the same things as her fellow-prisoners. Motionless, staring straight ahead, she was listening with bated breath. She was not trying to identify the muffled noises coming from the next room. Nor did she try to catch any sounds which might reach her ears from beyond the walls, from the village outside. With knitted brows she was listening intently to something within herself. It was a week already, no, more, ten days. And nothing. . . . A persistent, inexorable question tormented her incessantly: yes or no? Yes or no? The blood drummed loudly in her ears. Her heart raced. She imagined she was hearing the very sound of her blood as it ran through her veins, and of little hammers hammering in her pulses. How could she find out at last, how would she know?

She counted the days once more. Perhaps she had made a mistake? But no. It was always ten days, the same ten days. And there was reason enough . . . Ten days. . . . But her thoughts did not linger on them, they probed further, reviewing all the days which lay between this day and *that* day which broke her life in two. Malasha felt a sharp physical pain when she thought of *that* day. She clenched her fists until her nails cut into her palms, drew up her legs, curled herself up into a tight knot. Intolerable agony stabbed her to the marrow of her bones. It seemed to her that she could bear it no longer, that she would suddenly cry out, scream like some wild thing. She wanted to scream, to howl aloud, tear her hair, choke with her own cries and drown everything in noise—everything: the memory of that day and these ten days passed in perpetual counting and recounting of days which gave always the same result.

She writhed in torment. She felt as if she could not stand it, that she would die then and there. But death would not come. It was not so easy to die. She had to sit here in the dark, listen to the sound of human breathing and remember, remember without a moment's respite that she, Malasha, was accursed, an outcast, separated for ever and ever from the people, from the village, from everything that had been her life until now. And why? Why did it have to happen? And why to her alone of all the village?

She saw in front of her not the darkness of the prison but three

faces, three repulsive beastly snouts bending over her. They were stamped on her memory for ever as if on a photographic plate, they were eternally before her eyes and nothing could erase them from her memory or cover them up. Three faces, unshaven, with red bristles, teeth protruding like tusks from between parched lips, savage eyes. . . .

She had lived in that room with Ivan until a few months ago. Lived in that room and slept in that bed. But on *that* night the room was full of feathers flying out of a torn pillow, straw was strewn on the floor, her flower-pot with the painted rose on it had been thrown off the window-sill and its fragments were crunching under the boots of the German soldiers. She did not want to think of this, it hurt her to think of it, but she was unable to keep her mind off it. She was forced to remember, to remember without a moment's respite. There were three of them. Three faces unshaven, with reddish bristles—coarse guffaws—shouts, and then the iron grip of loathsome hands on her body, on her arms twisted above her head, on her legs prised wide apart. Then the slamming of the door and a grey cloud of vapour rushing in. After that there was nothing except this unbearable, unremitting torment. And these even more unbearable last ten days, when, from morning to night and through the sleepless nights, she listened intently to her own body and counted, counted to the verge of madness, and each day added one more day to the count and now there were ten of them already.

True, other people in the village had their troubles, others perished. Levanyuk hung on his gallows, Olena, big with child, was being tortured by the Germans in the barn. But none except she were carrying the seed of the German brutes inside them. None of them, however tormented, were doomed to nurture the enemy in their own body.

In the other corner Olga Palanchuk was whimpering like a child. A sudden blind fury, an unreasonable resentment welled up in Malasha. Why was that fool snivelling like that? What had she to snivel about? She had not been raped by the Germans, she had not experienced the worst any human being could suffer. What was she afraid of? That they would be killed, be hanged or shot? Malasha did not believe that this could happen. It would be too good, too much happiness to perish at the hands of the enemy. No, she did not believe this. They would be kept under arrest; perhaps the Germans would think up something horrible, something much more terrible than death, but there would not be death for them. Never could anything good, any happiness,

come from German hands. But death would be a happy deliverance.

Again she began to count the days—one, two, three. She got to ten and writhed again with agony. Her heart would burst, she could not bear it—it was impossible to bear it even another minute. But her heart did not burst and the little hammers still beat in her pulses as before. Staring into the darkness Malasha thought that she would go on like this, counting the days, until she came to the end of the count, until that day came which had to come, the day on which she, Malasha, wife of a Red Army man, would give birth to a German bastard.

Still she listened. The blood beat in her wrists, in her temples like little hammers. She laid her hand on her body. There, too, she felt the little hammers beating.

An uncontrollable loathing of her own body took possession of Malasha. It was no longer her body—it was the nest of a fritz who did not yet exist but who was yet there inside her. When she ate, it was not she herself who was eating; it was the fritz who was feeding so that he might grow and develop and dishonour even her misfortune. When she slept, it was not she who was refreshed, no, it was the fritz who rested. She was unable to think of *it* as child. A child was the child of Olena, whose cries could be heard at intervals even in that closed room, through those thick wooden walls. A child was the unknown boy who had been shot that night. Children were the three little ones of Chechorikha, the Malyuk children, all the children who were born and who grew up in the village and all of whose lives would sooner or later be threatened because of the coming of the Germans. These were children. Their mothers bore them, they were fair or dark, with blue eyes or brown, smiling and crying, crooning in their cradles or twittering like little birds. Mothers conceived their children, carried them, gave birth to them, nursed them. But what *she*, Malasha, was carrying in her womb, what *she* would give birth to was not a child: it was a wolf-cub, a fritz. She realized with horror that nothing could ever alter that. Even if it died—and she would strangle it with her own hands—even that would make no difference. Still she would eternally retain the memory of having carried a fritz and nourished him with her own blood. Everyone would look with hate and contempt at her swelling body, at her waddling gait. As she passed by big with child, they would all get out of her way, not because they wanted to make things easier for her but because of a deep contempt, because of the fear that they might touch her, the woman who was carrying a fritz in her belly.

They all knew about it in the village. They were all sorry for her, they all cursed the Germans and spoke of the day of retribution when there would be atonement for everything. But Malasha knew that this was impossible. She knew that others could be avenged. Pashchuk and Levanyuk and Olena and the burned cottages and the dead children. But for her there was no revenge, no redress. Could she not see, although no one reproached her, that the women never looked her in the eye, that people avoided her as if she were a leper. Between her and the rest of the village was an insurmountable barrier—that day when the three ravishers burst into her cottage, raped her and did not even bother to shoot her as was their wont. She had been spared for this life of torment. As if it were not enough that she had been outraged, degraded, turned into a dirty rag, she now had to count the days and see her count giving the same result every time. Though she was still clutching at desperate rags and tatters of hope that her count might be wrong, that such delays did occur sometimes without any further consequences and that another day or two would show that she was safe—at the bottom of her heart she knew well enough that she was pregnant and that nothing could alter the fact.

She remembered one summer full of sunlight, flowers and scents. Nights silver with dew, high grass up to the waist, hay-making on the river-bank, nights in the field huts, scent of new-mown hay, glittering stars, short crazy nights. No children were born of those embraces. Sweet nights, full of gladness, whispers from lip to lip, the fluttering of an overflowing heart—all that was gone without a trace as if it had never happened. And yet there were many of those nights, all through the haymaking season. She had given herself to that man with a tempestuous, delirious feeling, although nothing came of it later and they separated without anger or bitterness.

And now it had been only a minute, only one terrible half-hour and that half-hour was fated to bear fruit, to be a festering wound in her life, a wound from which a stinking discharge would seep for ever.

She thought of the time when she married Ivan. True, her married life had not lasted long, but there were many happy nights when the stars looked in through the chinks in the barn door and the June night smelt warmly of summer. Then he had to leave for the army and there it ended. Malasha still walked about the village as slim as ever, with little girlish breasts and slender waist and the lads still looked and smiled at her, forgetting that she was already married and would not exchange her Ivan

for any lad ever born. They liked to see her gleaming white teeth, hear her merry laughter, catch the arch sparkle of her black eyes.

But one nightmare half-hour had been enough to change all that. No one knew it yet and it did not show. But the days would go by and her misfortune would be plain to the whole village. As if the stigma of an irreparable dishonour had not been hard enough to bear, she now had to carry this fritz in her body and in torment give birth to him. Who would help her, who would want to be with her in her bitter hour? Which of the women would be willing to sully her hands with a wolf-cub, the spawn of the red killers. Yet Olga over there was crying for fear of death. Malasha was quite sure that they, the hostages, would not die. She did not know what would save them. She knew it was unthinkable that anyone should betray the dead boy or those who refused to abandon his dead body to the Germans. Nor would anyone give the Germans any grain. She did not know what would happen or how it would happen but she was quite sure she would not die, that they would not kill her. And if she were not killed, the others also would remain alive.

At first Chechorikha silently stroked Olga's hand. But Olga cried and cried and finally Chechorikha lost patience.

"What are you snivelling for? What must be, must be. Aren't you ashamed of yourself, crying like that?"

"I don't want to cry, it just happens," Olga sobbed helplessly, like a little child. It reminded Chechorikha of little Nina, her youngest, and she softened.

"Well, be quiet. Nothing is decided yet."

Malasha in her corner smiled bitterly into the darkness. It was all decided, she knew. There was no hope of death.

"I have left three kids behind, at home, I don't know what will happen to them, and yet I don't cry . . ." Chechorikha said. She suddenly felt an overwhelming longing to see her children, if only for an instant. What were they doing, what had happened to them? Had Malyuchikha taken them home or had they been left alone in the cottage? Perhaps they were frightened, afraid of the dark, of footsteps in the street, as they had been afraid of everything ever since the Germans had come and driven them out of their own house.

"Get out!" shouted a tall sergeant, and struck her with the butt of his rifle when she tried to get together a few bits of clothing to keep the children from freezing to death! "Get out!" he repeated, and the children ran out of the house in terror, out into the snow and a hard frost, Sonya with nothing on but her little shift.

Afterwards the Germans didn't like the cottage and moved into another and the Chechors could go back and live in their own home again. All they had to do was to clean out the passage. The Germans didn't like to go outside in the frost and they left their filth in the passage on the very threshold of the room. They did not seem to mind walking through it every time they went in or out, nor did the smell bother them. It had turned her stomach to clear away the German dung from the passage and she had carefully searched the room to see whether they had fouled in there as well. At the time she had thought that they had done it out of spite because the house hadn't suited them. But later, after the Germans had been in the village some time, the villagers found that they were doing the same everywhere. They simply didn't seem to notice the muck and the stench.

How would the children fare with Malyuchikha? If only Osya didn't fight with Sasha. He was both smaller and weaker than Sasha, but such a little gamecock, that he was always getting into trouble, always coming home full of bruises, always ready to fight anyone twice his size. Sonya would be all right, she was sensible far beyond her years. . . . But the other two, Osya and Nina. . . . And how would Malyuchikha manage with all those youngsters, what with two of her own and all! How would she feed them all in these terrible times?

Yevdokim heaved a sigh and said enviously: "That Grokhach does sleep soundly! Just listen to him!"

Grokhach was snoring rhythmically and very loudly in the darkness.

"What about you, Grandfather, don't you want to sleep?" Chechorikha asked, solely in order to detach her thoughts from the image of the bright little heads of her three children.

"Sleep? I've almost forgotten how. . . . I just doze a couple of hours or so, not more. It does make the day seem long, it does indeed."

"Have we been here long?" Olga asked suddenly.

"Don't know. The time seems long, sitting like this. But it must be evening—there is a lamp alight next door and that means it's evening. . . ."

"Only evening," Olga sighed with disappointment, "and I thought we have been here for I don't know how long."

"Well, we haven't. You, my girl, had better take yourself in hand. Who knows how long we shall have to sit here."

"She's young. Young people are always in a hurry," Yevdokim said.

Chechorikha turned towards Yevdokim in the dark. Her eyes

had already got used to the darkness and the narrow slit in the door admitted a little light. The old man's white head showed clearly against the black of the wall.

"Hurry? Where to? There's no more hurry for us, my lass. The time we spend here is ours, but after that . . . it is theirs. . . ."

"And if our boys come back?" Olga asked timidly. Surely it was impossible, she thought, that there should be no way out at all and that the doors of this dark chamber should open only on death.

"But the Germans have given only three days' time."

"A lot can happen in three days."

"With such a snowstorm blowing? Difficult job. How can our boys move in it, drag along the guns and machine-guns and all? Why, you can hardly see the end of your own nose in the blizzard. They might get lost in the snow in any little dip or gully."

Chechorikha was speaking calmly, but suddenly she became aware that she did not believe her own words.

True, the snow was there, but they had been waiting day after day, in spite of it, waiting stubbornly, with unshaken faith for the Red Army to come. That very morning she had been thinking that they would come, that perhaps they were already near Leshchany—perhaps they were already climbing up the hill or getting down into the gap—why not, after all? What did the Red Army care about blizzards. The people would lead them, show them the paths and passes—show them their own native land! And they knew all about winds and snow, they were not meeting them the first time!

Yes, Olga was right. They might come. They might easily come on one of those three days that were left until death. Suddenly the doors would fly open and they would all walk out of the dark prison into the white snow and meet their champions and then run quickly home, and then she would go quickly to Malyuchikha, to fetch her little ones.

Perhaps they were already on their way, under cover of darkness, behind the curtain of the blizzard which deadens all sound, they might be creeping quietly towards the village and then they would strike, with lightning suddenness, they would smash, shatter and crush like bed-bugs these German vermin who were sucking the blood of the village.

"Well, perhaps they will come," she said aloud, "perhaps we will live to see it."

"Do you think they will come?" Olga asked.

"Maybe," muttered Yevdokim. "High time too, high time!"

"They will find us, the village knows where we are kept," Olga whispered excitedly. It seemed to her at the time that the most important thing was that they should be found, that the door should be opened, that they should not sit here a single instant after the Germans were running out into the snowstorm under the blows of the Red Army.

"Don't you worry about that. If only they would come," Chechorikha said; "you go on as if you thought they were in the village already, near enough."

"Well, perhaps they are," Olga replied.

"Perhaps they are," the other woman repeated, and wrung her hands until the joints cracked.

Malasha was still sitting and looking at one fixed spot in the darkness. Yes, the others could wait, they could hope, for them there was a possibility of deliverance. But as for her, no one could help her, no one could save her. If the Red Army came, what of it? She could not go out to meet them, or greet them or look at them and be glad. She could not give them a drink of water, or invite them to her cottage. For what was she? A German mattress, that's what she was. She was carrying a fritz in her belly. She was accursed to all eternity. Even if the war were to end, even if Ivan were to come home—he would not come to her. People would tell him about *it* and he would give the cottage the go-by, and if he were to meet her in the street he would pass her as if they were strangers or perhaps he might even spit on the ground.

She heard Olga whispering with Chechorikha in the other corner. 'Of course, they chose a place for themselves as far away from me as possible,' she thought bitterly, quite forgetting that it was she herself who had waited until the others had settled down before she sat down in the furthest corner. Yes, Olga could wait, Olga might fear death, Olga had something to live for. Her Ostap would come back from the Army, they would get married and she would live and work the same as everybody, the same as before the war, and would bear Ostap children. Only she herself, Malasha, the best worker in the whole village and the prettiest lass, only she would never be the same as before the war.

Fedosya would mourn her Vassya, then the days and months would pass and she would remember her son without pain. That was a simple matter, he was not the first and not the last to die for his country. The Levanyuks, too, would forget their son—they had two other sons and two daughters and when the sons came back from the wars the house would be full. The cottages

destroyed by the Germans would be built up again and new trees would grow in the gardens instead of the ones the Germans felled for fuel. All wounds would heal and everything would be as before. Only for her was there no return to the past and no forgetting. All the others had some road before them, a hard one for some, an easier one for others—only she alone had no road in front of her.

At one time she had been proud of being the prettiest girl in the village, of being the best worker on the collective farm—she had enjoyed being the centre of all eyes even if there were a dozen girls there beside her. She had been glad that her voice rang sweeter in song than any other voice, that no other girl had such eyes, such hair, such sun-tanned apple cheeks, such arched clear-cut eyebrows as she. She had carried her head high and rejoiced in her beauty.

But even that had turned into evil and misfortune. It would have been better for her to be faded and wrinkled like old Martha, the midwife. It would have been better for her to be crooked and hunchbacked and lame like Ustya or ugly like red-haired, freckled Klava. It was because she was not like them that the three Germans had picked her out and sealed her doom.

From time to time voices and footsteps could be heard from the other room. *They* were there, the Germans, and they made themselves at home in the house of the village soviet as if it were their house. They regarded themselves as masters here. Malasha clenched her fist. They were not only here, they were everywhere, they were in Kiev, where Malasha had once been to see the exhibition. *They* were walking along the streets of Kiev, passing in front of its golden towers, treading on its pavements with their heavy boots. *They* were in Kharkov, *they* were everywhere in the land of Ukraine, trampling upon it with their army boots. Not only she, Malasha, but the whole Ukraine has been raped, dishonoured, humiliated, trampled underfoot. Her cities were reduced to ruins and the wind blew the ashes of her villages away; the bodies of her sons lay unburied on the snow, or swung from the gallows. The Ukrainian earth was soaking wet with blood and tears.

But a day would come when the liberated earth would again bask under the golden sun, again the Dnyepyr and the Worskla, the Lopan and the Psel would flow freely through the land, and their wild waters would wash the earth and cleanse it of all this wickedness, all this foul evil. Wheatfields would stretch out like shoreless seas, the pure gold of the sunflowers would blaze in the meadows, the hollyhocks bloom in the gardens and the orchards

be bright with the fiery globes of the tomato. The earth would flower again, clean and splendid and bursting with plenty.

But she, Malasha, would for ever remain what she was now, a pitiful wreck. To her all roads were closed for ever. A groan escaped her against her will.

"Not sleeping, Malasha?" Chechorikha asked.

Malasha started. She imagined that there was a forced note in the woman's voice and she flew into a rage. They needn't talk to her if they didn't want to—why pretend?

"No! And what business is it of yours?" she replied roughly.

"I only wanted to know."

"Why? You don't have to bother about me!"

"Why not? We're all in the same trouble, aren't we?"

Malasha laughed rudely, unpleasantly.

"Yes of course, *you* all are. But *my* trouble is different."

"Perhaps, but still it's trouble."

"A lot you know about trouble!" Malasha was boiling over with senseless rage for which she could find no vent. "Can't you sit and be quiet. Why does Grokhach stay put and sleep?"

"Don't speak to her . . . you know how spiteful she is . . ."

Olga whispered, and plucked Chechorikha by the sleeve.

But Malasha had heard her.

"Quite right! Why speak to me? I am spiteful, they all know I'm spiteful. But you are kind, aren't you?"

The other women said nothing. Malasha breathed hard and stared into the darkness.

She thought of the time when there was a piece about her in the newspaper, during the harvest. At that time no one thought her spiteful. The women and the girls embraced and kissed her. There was a picture of her in the paper too: it wasn't a very good picture, her face was lost in shadow and all you could see were her white teeth flashing in a smile, but still it was a picture, in the newspaper, and it said that she, Malasha, was a leading collective farmer. . . . Well, she had been that, what was written was no more than the truth. But now she, Malasha Vyshneva, leading collective farmer, was carrying the bastard of a lousy fritz in her belly.

The howling of the wind outside was loud enough to be heard even through the thick walls, through the great tree-trunks of which the house was built. Grokhach woke up suddenly and uttered a loud yawn.

"You certainly do sleep sound," Yevdokim said with envy.

"No harm in sleeping your fill—who knows what we may be up against later?"

"Who knows? We all know well enough!"

"Our boys might come," Olga said hurriedly. She wanted Grokhach to confirm that they might come, that they were sure to come.

"Of course they might. . . . Though it's not likely that they would come just now . . ."

Olga interposed quickly: "Or our guerillas may come. . . ."

"Oh, no, they won't," Grokhach contradicted her. "How could they come here. They are in the woods: far away and can't leave them. They couldn't possibly come all this way in the snow. The Germans would find their trail and kill them all. It's a different thing in summer, then you can go where you like, every bush can hide you, and give you cover. But now! No, they had much better wait for the spring and then nibble at the Germans from the forest. In this weather they've no business to come out into the open."

"And the Army?"

"The Army is different. The Army can break through. . . ."

Olga sighed. "How the wind howls . . ." she said.

"They say that Death walks in such weather," Yevdokim said.

Olga felt a shiver run down her spine. It was dark and dreadful enough in the room, why need the old man talk about such things?

"Quite true," Chechorikha said. "He is walking abroad in our land, ay, that he is."

They all fell silent as if they were listening to footsteps beyond the wall, as if they were trying to see Death walking past in the darkness.

"Nowadays there are two Deaths," the old man remarked.

"How two Deaths?"

"Of course there are two. . . . One is the German one, which takes our sort. And the other is the one that is lying in wait for the Germans."

Olga nestled closer to Chechorikha.

"Don't talk about these things, Grandfather, it frightens me."

"You should not be frightened of what is frightful," Grokhach said sternly. "Nowadays the whole world is frightful and the people are frightful too. . . . But we must be sure of ourselves and know we have nothing to be afraid of. Once you let them frighten you, they can do what they like with you."

"Who?"

"Why, the Germans, of course. . . . That's just what they're after. To get the people frightened. Once you begin to be afraid,

you're done for. But if you keep fear away, not even the Germans can do anything to you."

"Vasska wasn't afraid of them and yet they shot him. And Pashchuk."

"Did I say they wouldn't shoot you? That's what their rifles are for, to shoot us; that's what they're Germans for, to be killers. I wasn't talking of that—that isn't what gives strength. . . ."

"What is it then that gives strength?"

"Don't you know?"

She was silent, not knowing what to say.

"To be strong means to hold on to one's own and not to give way. Strength means to be silent when silence is wanted, and not let them force a single word out of you. And what is most important—to know that all this will come to an end and that not a single one of these Germans will escape with his life. . . . As for their shooting us . . . Ay, you are young, you can't remember how many people were killed in the other war, and in the civil war too. . . . How many did the Germans shoot around here in the year eighteen? And what of it? The Germans had to go, they vanished without a trace. But we stayed here. The earth stayed here and the people stayed on the earth—so everything stayed as it was before."

"But they're killing many more people now than in the year eighteen."

"Of course. Many more. But still, they can't kill everybody. There will be plenty left to sow again and build again. Wait and see—or if we don't live to see, others will see—how much better, richer, more sensible it's going to be than it was before this war."

Olga sighed.

"Still, I would like to see it myself."

"Of course you would. How old are you?"

"Nineteen."

"Nineteen! . . . Grandfather Yevdokim, when were we, you and I, nineteen the last time?"

"Come, come." Yevdokim pretended to be annoyed, "Why, my beard was already going grey when you could still walk under the table without stooping."

"True, true. And yet compared with her I'm an old man. Can't blame you, lass, for wanting to see for yourself. . . . At nineteen, ha-ha! Grandfather and I are older than you and even we want to live to see it. . . ."

"To see how everything will be after the war. . . ." Olga sighed sadly.

Grokhach suddenly jumped up.

"No, I should like to see more than that. I would like to see the last German give up the ghost here, in our village! I would like to see the last German hanging on a gallows in Kiev! I would like to set up a gallows on a hill over the Dnyepri and watch the last German hanging on it. And I should like to see those Germans who stayed at home in this war to twist ropes for our necks—I should like to see them brought here and watch them working to rebuild the burnt villages, restore the ruined cities, brick by brick. Remember what the newspapers said. We'll make them rebuild, brick by brick, to the last brick!"

"No, I'd rather we did it ourselves—rather than see them here any longer." Chechorikha said.

Yevdokim sighed.

"Our people are too soft—much too soft-hearted they are. . . . One day they're angry—the next they've forgotten it all. Our people don't know how to nurse a grievance——"

"You're wrong there, Grandfather! Our people are good-natured, true—but once they get a thing right down into their liver, look out for trouble! And now they're angry enough. . . . How could they forget? No, there are things they won't forget to their dying day, that they won't."

Malasha was listening in her corner and some of the things Grokhach said seemed to her to be her own thoughts. Yes, to see the last German on a gibbet, to see them working until they dropped. . . . But what good would that do *her*? Others might be satisfied and calm their hearts, but her own heart would never be calm again. No amount of blood, no length of time, no revenge could wash away her memories—they would remain seeping out of her heart for ever like a stinking discharge.

The last words of Grokhach seemed to remain suspended in the darkness; they seemed to gleam in letters of fire from the dark beams of the ceiling.

"They won't forget to their dying day."

And Malasha responded: "No!"

"I'm thirsty," Olga whispered.

"Better not think of that," Grokhach said sternly. "They won't give us any water. You can manage without water for three days. It isn't hot in here. You are sitting still, doing nothing, you'll be all right. But don't start thinking about it or you'll want to drink."

"Oh!"

"Aren't you ashamed of yourself, lass?" Chechorikha intervened. "What are you sighing and groaning about? . . . D'you

think you're the only one to be in trouble? All the others in the village are no better off than we!"

"But we are hostages!"

"What if we are? They said they would shoot us in three days? What of it? You were there, you heard it—they want the grain and threaten to shoot everybody who won't give it up. But you know as well as I that no one will give the Germans grain. So death is hanging over all our heads these days, hostages or no hostages!"

No one spoke. Olga was listening, as if waiting for the sound of Death's footsteps stalking through the village.

The village, wrapped in clouds of swirling snow, seemed to sleep calmly through the howling of the blizzard. The cottages crouched low as if nestling closer to the earth. The shrieking of the wind mingled with the cries of Olena in travail in the barn—but there were no other sounds beyond these, as if all were sunk in a profound sleep.

But the people in the cottages were not sleeping. They all heard Death stalking through the village, as Grandfather Yevdokim had said. Death was dancing among the snowflakes on the road, flying with the storm over the rooftops, creeping like a white ghost through cracks and crannies, touzling the thatched roofs, and mercilessly buffeting the last lime-trees not yet felled by German axes, covering the earth with its mighty wings.

Down there in the gully lay the dead. Death whirled up the snow and covered up the bodies. Whistling, it scattered snow over the black face of Vassya Kravchuk, the face his mother wiped clean so tenderly day after day. It heaped white barrows over the bodies of the Red Army men who had fallen in the battle for the village a month ago. Here in the gully was Death's kingdom, here where the dead lay under the snow, turned into stone and wood by the frost.

Death rocked and swung Levanyuk's body on the gallows, Levanyuk's, who had tried to get through to the guerillas. His body, too, was black and turned to stone. The rope creaked as the wind tugged at the remains and the legs of the body knocked against the poles with a dull, hard sound.

Death beat against the doors of the barn where Olena was lying in labour on the straw.

Death was biding its time and galloping through the village with shrieks of raucous laughter. The people in the cottages heard it and could not sleep. They lay motionless in their beds, staring at the ceilings, and listening to the German Death howling in the night. They heard it laugh, heard it sharpen its claws

—that German Death that was about to reap such a rich harvest. This concerned not only Pashchuk, shot in the gully, not only Levanyuk hanging on a German gallows. Now a German noose was hanging over all their heads, the black barrel of a rifle was aimed at all their hearts.

In the detention-room at the Commandant's H.Q. the hostages were saying what all the others in the village were thinking. They were talking of the things that drove sleep from every eye in the village on this night loud with the wind or death. Old Yevdokim was the first to break the short silence.

"They can't shoot everybody. . . . How could they? They would have to shoot the whole village? Not one of our people will give them anything."

"What do they care?" Grokhach said, and laughed angrily. "It wouldn't be the first time! You know what they did in Levanevka. And in Sady. And in Kostinka?"

The ghosts of dead villages rose before their eyes. Levanevka, burnt to the ground because of one stray shot fired at a German soldier. The Germans had set the village alight at the four corners, fired on the inhabitants who attempted to escape the flames and flung babies into the blaze before the eyes of their mothers. They saw the ghost of Sady, where the entire population, one hundred and fifty souls, were driven into a disused clay-pit and blown up with bombs. Kostinka, where the Germans killed all the men and drove women and children out into a forty-degree frost in nothing but their shifts, so that they all perished on the way to a neighbouring village where they hoped to find shelter.

"Sady, Levanevka, Kostinka . . . in our district alone. And what about all the other districts. What have they done to Kiev, to Odessa, to other cities? How much is left of our hamlets and villages? And what did they do in the year eighteen? Come on, Grandfather, you know them, this isn't the first time you've met them!"

Olga covered her face with her hands and sat in silence. Only a minute ago it had seemed to her that everything would be all right, that she would hear the sound of rifle-fire, then the familiar "Hurrah," and the door would fly open with a bang and release them to freedom and life. But now they were talking only of death, as if it were something unavoidable which would certainly come. Olga's heart filled with horror because they spoke of it so calmly, as if death were some indifferent trifle. 'It's all very

well for them to talk,' she thought bitterly. 'Yevdokim has lived his life, how many years? Eighty years, they say, his sands have been running—at that age it's easy to die. . . . And Grokhach? Grokhach was already a fighting man in 'eighteen, he has grown-up daughters and a shrew of a wife—what does he care? Chechorikha . . .' Olga hesitated. 'Well, of course, Chechorikha has three little children and her husband away in the Army—but still, she has already had a husband, has had children—but I, what have I seen of life? Easy for them to talk.'

"No one will give any grain," Yevdokim said.

"Of course not," Chechorikha agreed.

That was what they all thought, the whole village, down to the last cottage perched on the edge of the gully. The grain had been carefully hidden, buried with the utmost circumspection in pits dug out of the stone-hard frozen earth far away in the fields. There in the earth lay the golden wheat and rye and barley, everything they had had no time to take away and give to the Red Army, all that was left to them of the inexhaustible, generous, unprecedented golden harvest of the autumn. The grain lay under a thick covering of earth, and under barrows of snow blown over it by the blizzards. No one could ever find it, no one could even guess where the secret granaries lay. Not unless the Germans dug up many hundreds of acres to a depth of two-three yards. For that golden grain lying in the earth was not merely grain from which the village could make bread. Had it been bread alone, it might have been sacrificed for the sake of life.

But in the earth, with the grain screened from German eyes, lay the secret, hidden, golden heart of the mother-country. What lay there, entrusted by the earth to peasant hands, was the harvest, the flower of this earth, and its heavy golden fruit. To give up the grain meant giving the German Army bread. To give up the grain meant feeding the lousy fritzes, filling their hungry bellies, heating their rotting, frost-bitten bodies. To give the fritz bread meant striking a blow at the very hearts of those who in frost, snowstorm and blizzard were fighting the enemy with selfless, self-sacrificing heroism. To give the Germans bread meant betraying the land to the enemy, playing traitor to their own kin and acknowledging the Germans to be masters of the fruitful Ukrainian earth and lords of the Ukrainian villages. To give up the bread meant giving up themselves and their nearest and dearest, meant disobeying the slogan which had reached every village, which had fallen on every ear, and touched every heart: not a crumb of bread to the enemy! To give up the bread meant repudiating the mother-country, comforting the enemy, betraying

those who were dying in this war and those who had died in the civil war and in the year eighteen and earlier—betraying all those who had ever fought for liberty and won it with their hearts' blood.

In the village, where one-time day-labourers were living on their own land, on a rich collective farm, there was no doubt in any heart. The women were calculating and planning for the future, when they themselves would be gone.

Old Mother Kovalchuk listened in the dark to the breathing of her eight children sleeping on the bed and on the stove. Calmly, in a housewifely manner, she decided that Lena, the eldest, was already old enough to look after the younger children, to wash, cook and sew for them. The Red Army would come back and there was enough food hidden away to feed everyone. Until then they would just have to get along like all the rest.

Vishenkova bent over the cradle of her youngest in the darkness and tried to figure out who would nurse the baby, who it was who had a nursling of her own. She knew the baby would not be left to die—a foster-mother would take it and suckle it at her own breast.

Grokhachikha looked into the darkness and considered matters calmly: Grokhach was under arrest as a hostage and the question now arose as to who would be made responsible for the non-delivery of grain? He or she? She came to the decision that it would be she after all. She was not in the least worried. There were no small children, the girls were grown-up, could look after themselves.

Young Vanyuk's wife was thinking of her husband and her heart contracted with pain. As things had turned out she would not see her husband after all. A month ago he had written to say that he was wounded in hospital and would perhaps be given home leave when he got well. The month passed by and the Germans took the village. And now, even if the Red Army did come back, she would be gone. She was sorry, not for herself but for her husband. He was so soft-hearted and awkward, he would find life difficult alone.

People lay in the dark and considered their affairs according to their lights. They lay in their cottages and were all different, quite unlike each other. But they all knew and thought the same thing that night: without any previous discussion or agreement each and all had, firmly and irrevocably, decided for themselves that the grain would remain in the earth, that no German hands would dig it up from its hiding-place and that this was even more important than life itself.

Death, a German Death, was flying over the village, laughing, groaning and squealing with the wind. The villagers in their cottages heard it. But so did the German soldiers standing at their posts in the night, freezing on sentry-go, looking in terror over their shoulders, anxious to walk noiselessly over the creaking snow. They, too, heard the sound of Death. Their Death was in hiding, it stole up to them, quite close, and blew its noiseless icy breath into their faces. They felt it lurking in the gully, hiding behind the corner of a cottage, creeping silently up a thatched roof. Death watched them out of a thousand icy eyes and passed sentence without words, through sealed lips. It vaulted stealthily over the garden fences, disappeared behind hurdles, stooped over wells. Death was everywhere and the German soldiers felt it. It marched in step with them along the village street, stopped when they stopped, followed them home, and drew the black veil of heavy dreams over their eyes. They felt its cold gaze on their bodies, its invisible eyes pierced them, the breath of its invisible mouth froze them to the marrow, the breath of that taciturn, irreconcilable, pitiless Ukrainian death which counted them all on its bony fingers.

V

THE WIND ROARED AND HOWLED, THE BARN CREAKED AS IF ABOUT to fly away and topple into the ravine. The rafters groaned, and the thatched roof rustled as the wind tore clumps of straw out of it and carried them far out into the snowy plains lost in the clouds of whirling flakes.

Olena screamed. She screamed at the top of her voice. Savage pains rent her body. Not only the pangs of childbirth—but added to them the aftermath of all the blows, all the bayonet-stabs, all the heavy falls she suffered when the German soldiers drove her to and fro along the road all night, and added to that again the effects of cold, hunger and thirst. All this now fell on her like a pack of hungry wolves, tearing her with greedy fangs. She felt her body being torn to pieces, burning with a living fire, pierced by a thousand poisoned darts.

Olena screamed. Now she was permitted to scream. She was in travail and could now break that seal of silence which her will, strained to the utmost, had imposed on her. She had been silent from the moment the Germans had dragged her from her cottage until the moment when she understood that in spite of everything she was giving birth to her child, that neither the blows from the rifle-butts, nor the falls in the snow, nor the cold

had killed the child in her womb. The child was alive and wanted to come out into the light, was fighting to get out, making way for itself and pitilessly rending her body.

She screamed in a voice which had nothing human—it was the cry of an animal and it brought her relief. It dulled the pain, obliterated the cold, and drowned the sinister howling of the wind in her ears.

The door of the barn creaked on its hinges. She did not even turn her head. The pains came on in ever quicker succession, with ever greater intensity, and she screamed, screamed as much as she pleased, as much as her tormented body demanded.

The soldier stopped at the door and wanted to shout at her—but then he understood that she was in labour. Another soldier joined the first. They looked on, laughed and talked to each other. But to Olena it was a matter of complete indifference that she was lying there naked on the straw, and that strange men were looking at her with shameless eyes and laughing at her. She was giving birth to a child and that fact divided her, as if by a wall, from the world in which the Germans ruled; it screened her from their shameless stare and served as an armour to protect her from their stupid guffaws. She was giving birth to a child and apparently they decided to leave her alone—they only stood near the door and waited without coming in.

Olena's cries grew louder. The women in the neighbouring cottages made the sign of the cross and looked out horror-stricken into the terrible storm outside. Olena Kostyuk, alone and unaided, was giving birth to a child in the cold and empty barn. They had thought that she was already dead, that she had perished of cold, that the child had died in her womb long ago. But behold, Olena was in labour and there was no one near her to give her a drink of water, to ease a pillow under her head, to aid her with a friendly hand. She was giving birth to a child as no one had ever borne a child before in this village—naked, alone, in the frost, thrown down on the clay floor of the barn. The women made the sign of the cross, clenched their teeth and closed their ears, but their curiosity compelled them to listen again and again. Was she still crying out? Yes, she was still crying out, with a strong, a deafening cry—it was amazing that her tormented, exhausted, martyred body could yet emit such sounds.

Finally the cry passed into a howl and then ceased.

"She has borne her child," whispered Malyuchikha, whose cottage was nearest of all.

"Borne her child," repeated little Zina.

For a while Olena lay as if stunned. Here was her child. Despite everything and everybody it had made its appearance in the world, the child of a father who was already dead and of a mother who by rights should have been dead long ago. But here he was—a son. A queer red little creature.

She took the child in her arms. There was no one to aid her, to do what was required. Like a dog she bit off the umbilical cord and tied it up with a piece of the fringe of her shawl, torn off the first day she was locked up here before she was questioned. She wiped the child with numb hands, wishing for a bowl of water, perhaps only a few drops of water to wash at least its little face, if not more.

The baby was crying with the natural, healthy voice of a healthy child. It took Olena's breath away. She had a son. The first son, the first child of her body, that had been barren forty years. Now she had a son. He had been born in spite of everything.

"Mikola, it's a son," she wanted to say. She would have liked to please her husband, to pay him back for all his kindness to her. Not once in all these years, though he had passionately wanted children, had he ever hurt her, ever reproached her, ever said a bitter word. He had never complained that he had taken a barren wife; that though she looked strong and healthy, she must be rotten inside, because she wasn't like other women who conceived and bore children and suckled them.

Olena had even found it hard to believe at first that she was pregnant. Why, she was old, she was forty already. And yet it proved to be true.

Then Mikola had to go away and join the Army. He said good-bye to her, but she knew that what hurt him most of all was to part from his unborn child.

But now Mikola was gone, he had been killed at the front and the child was born and it was a son. It was born in a German dungeon—born under the shameless eyes of German soldiers who were incapable of respect even for a mother in labour—born to the accompaniment of their ribald laughter.

The child lay on the cold, wet straw. Olena took the naked little thing in her arms, pressed it to her bare breast, breathed on it to keep it warm. An indescribable fear overwhelmed her: that the child, which had been born in spite of everything, would now freeze and die here in the cold, like a naked fledgling, like a blind kitten. Olena tried to warm him with her own body, breathe her own warmth into him, but she felt her hands growing icy, her whole being pervaded with the piercing cold, her blood

freezing in her veins. The soldiers at the door were discussing something among themselves. Then one of them went away and came back quickly.

"Here!" he said carelessly.

Her shift, her skirt, her bodice dropped beside her on the straw, her own things which the soldiers had torn off her last night before they drove her out into the snow. Olena glanced incredulously at the soldier. He smiled fatuously. She snatched the shift with trembling hands and solicitously wrapped the infant in it. The tiny ridiculous, doll-like face looked out of the folds of linen with dim blue eyes like the just-opened eyes of a puppy. Olena gulped with emotion. She was happy that she had something to wrap the child in. In that instant she forgot everything else over this, the most important thing. It seemed to her that everything would come right now, that the nightmare was over. With trembling hands she put on the skirt and bodice. Although they were not sufficient to warm her, she felt relieved at covering up her naked, tormented body. The sheepskin coat and the shawl . . . yes, if she had the sheepskin coat and shawl left behind in the officer's room. . . . But she forced herself to remain silent. It was enough that the child was lying wrapped in clean linen, covered well enough to preserve it from the cold for the time being. She took the child on her lap and folded the edge of her skirt over it. The baby lay quiet, it was evidently not cold and what more could she desire? Even this little that she had been given seemed to her a quite extraordinary, almost miraculous happening which she failed to understand. Although she had seen the German throw her the clothes, she still could not understand it. The skirt, the bodice and the shift might have fallen from the roof or been blown in by the wind from the snowy fields.

The door closed with a creak. Olena leant her head against a beam and fell into a feverish half-sleep. Shivers ran down her spine, she felt alternately cold and hot, and in her semi-consciousness she saw Mikola walking along the road and next to him stood that dark woman, the officer's hussy. Mikola said something and Olena suddenly felt her heart pierced with a stab of jealousy. She started, woke and looked around her with dazed eyes. No, there was no Mikola here, no officer's hussy, only the barn, an armful of straw and the son in her arms—a little white bundle with a red little, round little face. She was terrified at the thought that she might have dropped the infant in her sleep and she huddled closer to the wall. Again she dozed off.

Disjointed fragments of memories floated past in an unin-

interrupted stream. The overseer shouted . . . but how could he, he had been killed, he had fallen down dead and yet here he was, on his feet and shouting and Red Army men passing by, but Mikola isn't among them. Curly is there, he is waving his hand and carrying a large bolt of linen. The linen unwraps itself from the bolt and turns into an endless road running through the village and on this narrow white road her little new-born son is toddling along.

"Look, he is walking already," says Fedossya Kravchuk. Olena is so surprised that she wakes again from her doze.

Her throat was burning with painful thirst, her tongue was rough and harsh and wooden and lay in her mouth as if it did not belong to her. Her lips were parched and when she touched them with her hands a tiny spot of blood remained on her finger. There was a singing in her ears, her bones ached and an infinite weariness overcame her. She looked at the child, touched its forehead and felt it cold as ice, but she understood that this was because she herself was hot with fever. She dozed off again. In her dream she saw water, water without end, a river ran and spread into a lake and she had a bottomless bucket and could not fill it with water. She went down on her knees and saw very clearly, more clearly than when awake—a hole in the ice, with green edges. Black water rippled and gurgled and overflowed in the struggle to break through to freedom and then again disappeared under the ice, running away on its distant journey. A thick layer of snow lay on the ice and at one point was slowly sifting into the water like flour out of the opening of a flour-bin. As the snow fell into the water it suddenly took on a green colour, clotted into lumps, and swirled round and round in the opening of the icehole. Olena wanted to seize this lump of snow and wet her dry lips with it, but the water washed it away and it disappeared under the ice.

Suddenly long cracks appeared around the hole and the ice began to break up with a crash. Olena felt that she was tottering on the edge of a watery abyss and woke up, too weak even to lift her head. She heard the calm regular breathing of the infant. He wasn't thirsty. But would she have milk to give to him when he did want to drink? She herself had had nothing to drink for so long, it seemed an eternity. What were the two-three mouthfuls of snow she succeeded in swallowing despite the Germans? She was terribly thirsty now—her lips hurt, her tongue hurt, her throat hurt and a painful cramp compressed her gullet. Her entrails heaved with a racking belch. Again she sank into a stupor. Again she saw the sifting of white sand, white as it was

in summer in the river, flying sand as fine as dust—then it was white flour running through the mill, the whole world was lost in a cloud of white flour—it was difficult to breathe, her mouth was full of white dust, but she had to go along a dusty road, she had to go on at all costs, quickly, without losing an instant. But her feet sank into the sand, the sun singed her without mercy and there were burning cottages in front of her—there was a fire in the village. At all costs she must save her baby from the flames—but a strong wind is blowing and sparks are flying in all directions. Already her shawl and skirt are alight. But why did she have to put on a sheepskin and a shawl in this heat? And now there was no time to take them off, because she had to run, run fast, or the flames would seize on the little head of the baby. But the bridge . . . the bridge is on fire . . . a tall flame is rising high, beams are falling with a crash. . . . So she was too late, she did not run away in time and now everything was falling on top of her. In despair she is searching for the child . . . the child . . . she has dropped it and now . . . the beams fall on it . . . the flames seize on it. . . . She could see from the forest how the Germans ran to and fro helplessly around the burning bridge, how they waved their hands and shouted something . . .

The shouting woke her. Over her stood a German soldier, stirring her with his boot.

She immediately came to herself. The German, with a gesture, ordered her to get up. Overcoming her weakness with a tremendous effort she rose to her knees and laboriously struggled to her feet, pressing the child to her breast. The soldier pushed her towards the door with the butt of his rifle. The white world of snow which opened up before her eyes dazzled her. She walked along obediently, but staggered in her walk as if drunk. The German soldier followed her. Olena understood that she was being led out to be questioned again.

Hauptmann Werner looked at Olena with disgust. The spectacle she presented was terrible enough. Her face was yellow with a repulsive inhuman yellowness. A rivulet of blood had run from the split lips and had clotted on her chin. An enormous black, red, and violet bruise under one eye had pushed the eye upwards. Tangled, clotted strands of hair hung down both sides of her drawn face. Her bare legs were black.

Werner drummed on his desk with his fingers and nodded to the soldier to give the woman a chair. She was surprised, but immediately sat down without waiting to be told and stared fixedly into the German's watery eyes.

"Boy or girl?" he asked, indicating the child with his chin.

"A son," she replied in a hoarse undertone. He gave a curt order to the soldier, who brought a mug of water. It seemed to Olena that she was dreaming again. She seized the mug and drank greedily, choking on the cold water, savouring the moisture as it wetted her aching lips, her dry tongue, her burning throat.

"Enough," Werner said, and the soldier took the mug away. Olena looked after it with wild eyes full of despair. But the water was taken away, it stood on the edge of the table. Its surface was still in motion, it was there, quite near, that cold fresh water in the mug. Her lips ached worse than before. In her throat she still felt the freshening moisture which made her thirstier than ever, if it were possible to be any thirstier.

"So it's a son" drawled the captain. Olena strained all her faculties to hear and understand what was going on.

Something terrible was hidden in that room—some unknown danger was lurking there in wait for her, but she did not know what it was. The permission to drink a few gulps of water, the chair, the permission to sit down, the personal question asked by the captain—all this filled her with such violent apprehension that she began to tremble. The tremor seized her whole body, ran through every vein and every muscle. She gazed watchfully into the face of the German captain.

"So you have borne a son" he said a second time. "A healthy, living son."

Olena waited for the next move.

"Well, now, I think, you will come to your senses. Now you are concerned not only with yourself. Now you can save or kill your son. That's how it is. Save him or kill him," he said very slowly and with peculiar emphasis.

She instinctively pressed the child to her breast. Werner watched her every movement, every change of expression on her face.

"Last night somebody tried to bring you bread. Who was it?" he asked gently, as if the question were of no importance.

"I don't know."

"What do you mean, you don't know?"

"I don't know," she repeated, looking him straight in the eye with such assurance that he believed her. After all, she might really not know.

"Which of your neighbours has children?"

"Children?" She was surprised. "They all have children. Everybody has children."

Yes, everybody had children—except herself. And now she

too had a child, a boy, a little baby boy. He was sleeping in her arms, wrapped in his mother's shift, here in the German Kommandantur. But he didn't know what 'German' meant. No, not yet, he didn't.

"Who do you think might have brought the bread? Who would be likely to have sent a boy about ten to eleven years old?"

In her mind she ran over all her neighbours. Not, of course, because she wanted to answer the question, but because she herself wanted to know who had tried to help her in her most difficult hour, who it was who had risked the German bullets in order to feed her. But they all had children and many of them had sons of ten or eleven. No, she could not guess who it had been, even to satisfy herself.

"I don't know. There are so many boys in the village. There are children in every cottage."

Werner frowned. He understood that she really didn't know.

"Very well. . . . Tell me, where might Curly be now?"

Olena went cold all over. So he was starting that again! But she felt the warm little body of her son in her arms and strength and confidence radiated from that tiny body into hers. Now she was no longer alone under the crossfire of German questions. Now she had her son with her, born in torment on the bare clay floor of the barn—her child for whom she had waited twenty years and had now at last lived to bear.

He was with her, her son. His little heart beat under her hands like the heart of a bird, fast and feebly. There was the round, red little face, with barely visible eyebrows, the nose like a little button, the most beautiful, the most wonderful little baby she had ever seen. She was calm and confident that now no one could touch her—her little son was with her.

"Where might he be now?" Werner repeated slowly, with a warning note in his voice.

"I don't know."

"Oh, you don't know? And where were they when you came back to the village?"

"I don't know. . . . Somewhere in the forest. . . ."

"What forest?"

She shrugged her shoulders.

"In the forest."

The answer gave nothing away. The white plain, stretching on all sides round the village, was surrounded by forest on every side. There was forest to the east and to the west, forest to the north and to the south. Only this part of the whole district

was clear of trees and that was why Werner's unit was left alone in the village by the guerillas. Other units, however, had been the victims of all sorts of continuously recurring incidents and that was why the German command was so insistently demanding information which might lead to the discovery of the hiding-place or whereabouts of Curly and his guerilla detachment.

"Lots of forests round here. From which direction did you come to the village?"

"I don't know. Can't remember. . . . There was snow everywhere, they led me out and put me on my way, that was all. . . ."

"Hm—hm. . . . What road was that?"

"I can't remember."

"You must have a short memory. Why, you only got back four days ago."

She remembered with surprise that it was quite true, she had not been home more than six days. So Werner knew nothing of the first two. Six days—and to her it seemed that a whole life had gone by since that morning she had quietly made up her bundle and left the dug-out in the forest.

Werner slowly lit a cigarette. Then he raised his eyes and looked into Olena's yellow face covered with blue bruises.

"Listen, woman, you are a mother. . . ."

Again those words. But now it was true, she had her little son in her arms, a tiny morsel, born on the barn floor, wrapped in his mother's shift.

"You have a son."

Her yellow face lit up with a smile that came from the bottom of her heart. Yes, she had a son, she had a son. . . .

"You want him to live and be in good health, you want him to grow up?"

Yes, of course, of course she wanted him to live and be well and hearty! Of course she wanted him to grow . . . ! First he would sit up, then stand up on his little feet. He would totter about the cottage, crawl over the threshold, grip things with his tiny fingers. He would run after the cat, after the dog, after the calf. He would slip into the garden and pull up the carrots from the ground. Then he would be bigger, he would go to school, he would have a satchel with books in it and would stand on his dignity as a schoolboy. And then? No, Olena could not imagine what would happen then, she could not imagine that the tiny creature she held in her arms would grow up, would get married and have children of his own. . . .

"I am giving you a chance to save him. I am giving you a

chance to save your own life and the life of your child. Don't be a fool—take your chance when you get it. . . .”

Olena said nothing. She did not quite understand what the German was driving at, but she felt uneasy again and a chill ran down her spine. What was he up to? Why was he talking so calmly, so gently and so persuasively, as if he really understood her and wanted to talk to her like one human being to another?

“We shall find the guerillas anyway. A day sooner or a day later, but we'll find them. Think it over. Everything is in our hands. The Red Army is smashed. It's all up with them, so why be stupid and obstinate? The guerillas are in the forest and don't know what's going on. They don't know it, but they are surrounded on every side; there is no escape for them, no salvation. If not to-day, then to-morrow they will fall into our hands and be punished. But I am willing to forgive you the crimes you committed together with them. They persuaded and deceived you. And you had no son at that time. . . . We will even forget that you blew up the bridge. You can live quietly in the village and bring up the child. . . .”

She listened intently, her eyes fixed on his face.

“Don't imagine that I am a brute or a monster. I am only doing my duty. I am doing my duty as a soldier towards my country. . . . But I am sorry for you and sorry for your kiddie. If you care nothing for yourself, at least have pity on your child. You gave him his life, you have no right to take it away from him. . . .”

“What do you mean—take it away?” she asked mechanically, as if she were thinking of something else.

Werner impatiently tapped his cigarette on the table.

“You understand—you understand quite well that by refusing to answer questions you are condemning your baby to death. Think it over. I will wait. Think it over and then tell me whether you will make a statement or not. But I think you will be sensible and answer me. In any case you can't do the guerillas any good, but you can save yourself and the child.”

He got out some tobacco and cigarette papers from the drawer and began slowly to roll himself a cigarette. Olena watched his broad fingers covered with reddish hairs. Her eyes followed the falling flakes of tobacco, the little creases on the white paper. The flame of a match sputtered and blue smoke rose in rings towards the ceiling.

“Well?”

Olena shrugged her shoulders.

“You refuse to answer me?”

"I don't know anything."

He stood up and leant towards her, resting his hands on the table, his face contorted with rage.

"Ah, so that's how you take it? I treat you like a human being and you dare to . . . Wait, I'll show you! . . . Hans!"

A soldier appeared at the door.

"Come here."

Two men came in armed with rifles. Olena recognized them as the same men who had guarded her in the barn—who had stared at her in her labour and laughed at her.

"Hold the woman. Give me the brat."

The soldier snatched the child from her arms, before she realized what was happening. She sprang forward, but iron hands held her from both sides. Olena's maddened eyes clung to the child. The soldier was holding it awkwardly in his arms and she was afraid he would drop it.

"Put it on the table."

The child was now lying on the table between Olena and the German. The paws of the German soldiers gripped her shoulders painfully and she knew that she could never break away from them.

The child lay on the table, a little bundle with a tiny red face hardly showing under the linen covering its head. Werner looked with loathing at the peacefully sleeping tiny creature. Suddenly the little lids fluttered. Two tiny lakes, blue and misty like the newly-opened eyes of a puppy, glistened dimly. The tiny chin began to tremble. Olena's heart contracted painfully—the baby began to cry with the pitiful helpless cry of a new-born babe. The tiny mouth gasped for air, the little forehead grew even redder and the eyebrows showed on it like pale, near-white lines. Olena tried to tear herself loose, but heavy hands pressed her down to her chair.

"I am not going to coddle you any more," Werner said hoarsely. "Will you talk or won't you? I am asking you for the last time?"

She took her eyes off the child and whispered, stressing each word: "Nothing; I will say nothing."

Captain Werner tore open the neckband of the shift. Olena's little son lay naked on the table, his little belly bulging, his little fists clenched, his little legs bent upwards. He lay and cried. Werner grabbed the baby by the neck, like a puppy, and lifted it from the table between finger and thumb. The little legs dangled in the air. Olena saw the tiny toes with transparent pink little nails like the petals of a flower.

"Well?"

Werner very slowly raised his pistol

Olena was petrified Her hands and feet turned into ice The room widened and the German grew to a giant before her eyes The creature who stood on the other side of the table was no longer the man who had spoken to her a minute ago, but some ogre of immense proportions whose head reached up to the clouds And in all this expanding, enormous, endless void her pink, naked, tiny son was dangling lonely between earth and sky He was choking from the pressure of the captain's grip He ceased crying and gave no sound Only his legs twitched convulsively and his little hands opened and closed as if snatching at the air

"Well? Show us what you are, a Bolshevik bitch or a mother?"

Olena came to herself The captain no longer loomed like a mountain between earth and sky The room again assumed its normal proportions.

"Answer me "

"I am a mother," Olena replied, giving herself the name they had called her by, there in the forest, when they thanked her for her care, for her kind words, for a cooked meal or the washing of a shirt

"So you will tell where they are?"

She did not look at her son She looked straight into the watery eyes surrounded by whitish eyelashes

"I will say nothing, nothing at all . "

The barrel of the pistol approached the tiny face Olena saw it though she did not look.

"This is your only child, isn't it?" asked Werner

She shook her head

"No "

The hand with the pistol stopped in mid-air

"What? You have other children? Sons? Daughters? Where? Here, in the village?"

A radiant smile suddenly appeared on the swollen, cracked, dry lips of Olena

"Sons . . nothing but sons . . many sons . . there, in the forest . . . Curly and the others . . out there . . ."

Werner fired. Straight into the tiny face There was a smell of cordite and smoke. The soldiers who were holding Olena started

Werner shook the little body.

"Here you are, mother."

The little legs hung down lifeless, the little fists were tightly clenched. There was no face—a bloody wound yawned in its stead.

"Look what you have done to your child," Werner said.

Olena nodded. She was far away, in the forest. What were they doing now in the forest? Were they sitting round a fire or were they stealing along forest paths to surprise a German detachment? Were they surrounding a house used as German headquarters? Or were they retreating into the forest, taking their wounded with them? The soldiers looked at her with superstitious terror. Their captain saw that blood was dripping on to the floor from the dead body of the baby. He shook himself with disgust.

"Take this away!"

The soldier hesitated.

"I said take it away!" the captain hissed angrily, and the soldier hastily took hold of the body.

"For the last time I ask you, are you going to answer me?"

Olena gave no reply—she had not even heard the question. She was looking out of the window at the flurries of snow driven by the gale.

"If you won't answer, we'll make an end of you straight away."

She did not hear him and did not reply. It was all over. Her little son was gone, the child she had waited for, for more than twenty years. Her heart was calm, there was a dead emptiness within her, but no fear, no alarm, no trembling.

Olena looked at the captain with vacuous eyes, indifferently, as if he were a lifeless object, a piece of wood or a stone.

"Take her away and finish her off!" the captain directed. "But not anywhere near the house, there is enough such carrion about already. Best shove her in the river."

Olena obediently went where the rifle-butts pushed her. Yes, this was the village where she had been born, where she had grown up, where she had been married and had waited in vain for a child. The child had come at last only to be taken away after a few hours. Now he was gone. She herself had given him up to death, she had watched with her own eyes the barrel of the gun sloping towards him—and yet she had not said the word that would have averted it from the tiny head. No, she had not said the word.

"I couldn't say it, little son!" she whispered, as if the dead child could hear her. She looked at it—the soldier was carrying the body clumsily, with repugnance, so that the head was hanging

down. She stretched out her hand. The escort hesitated, but he disliked carrying the dead child so much that he decided to let the mother have it on his own responsibility. She hugged the body to her breast. It was still warm and the legs and arms had not had time to stiffen. Had it not been for the horrible thing that had taken the place of the face one might have thought the child was asleep.

Olena walked along between the soldiers of the escort without thinking where they were taking her. She had not understood the order the captain had shouted at them in German. She knew that they would probably kill her now, but that did not worry her. For her the world was ended with the death of her little son.

The wind blew and the air was full of snow-dust. Olena glanced at the frozen windows of the cottages. Not a soul was to be seen anywhere. Alone she had to go on that last walk, the walk to her death. No one looked out of a door, no one was in view. The cottages seemed uninhabited. Only Germans were to be seen about, but they paid no attention to the prisoner.

A blow from a rifle-butt turned her off the road on to the path. She was surprised, but went where she was pushed. She thought they were taking her to the square, near the belfry, where they usually hanged those found guilty of crimes against the German authorities. But the path skirted the cottages and dipped into the gully. There was little wind here—the wind blew on the level ground above but here in the hollow it was quiet. Olena walked along the icy path as if on broken glass. Her naked feet were now covered with wounds and ulcers—they were masses of bloody flesh with the skin hanging in tatters around them. This was the path along which the women carried the water and it was all covered with a crust of ice. Her wounded feet slipped on the icy crust and tiny splinters of it pierced her swollen feet. Olena stumbled once and then began to stumble at every step she took. A fierce pain tore at her body and she felt streams of warm blood run down her thighs.

The brook at the bottom of the hollow was frozen and covered with snow, and could only be identified by the ice-hole from which the women fetched the water for this end of the village. Olena saw from afar the dark opening of the daily rebroken ice-hole. She did not understand where they were taking her. Further along, in the gully, lay the dead who could not be buried because of the German ban. Were they going to shoot her there? She, the simple village woman, to be with the Red Army men who died in battle?

“Hi, where are you off to?”

She did not understand the German words, but a blow from the rifle-butt made their meaning clear. The soldiers, one in front and one behind her, went straight to the hole in the ice.

"Give me the whelp!" shouted one of them and stretched out his hand towards the child. Frightened, she hugged the dead body to her breast as if she feared they could still hurt it.

"Give it!" the soldier repeated threateningly and jerked away her hand. The little body fell on the snow. Olena went down on her knees beside it. The tiny fingers, the little feet were already blue and the pink incarnate of the skin had disappeared. The blood on what had been the face was black and clotted in dark lumps.

Before she could pick up the body the soldier picked it up on the point of his bayonet and threw it into the air. It came down at the very edge of the ice-hole. The other soldier ran up to it, again spit the little body on the point of his bayonet and tossed it away. This time the aim was good—there was a splash, bubbles burst on the dark surface of the water and the current carried the little body away under the ice.

Olena knelt on the ice as if petrified. She recognized her dream, recognized the place, the dark hole in the ice. It had green edges and the black water rippled and gurgled and overflowed the edges in its struggle to break through to freedom of the hole, then, running away on its distant journey, it again disappeared under the ice. On the banks and on the ice of the frozen brook lay a thick coat of snow. On one side of the ice-hole, where the tiny body had first fallen, there remained a red-stained mark like the impression of a seal.

Olena looked into the quietly gurgling water with lifeless eyes. That water had taken the little body. Her little son was gone. The only trace of him, the only sign of his existence was that blood-stained mark on the snow, a seal impressed on its white surface. Now the water was carrying him away under the ice, away on a distant, unknown journey. Carrying him under the ice, perhaps pushing him down, knocking him against the stones, throwing him up on the surface, banging him against the ice! No, no, Olena knew as if she could see through the ice and snow—her own native brook was cradling the tiny body gently, tenderly, watching over it like a mother, wrapping it in soft, caressing water, washing off the blood, the powder marks, the touch of German paws. Her own native brook, the clean water of her native land. The water, the friendly water of her native land had opened its arms to the infant that had lived less than a day, and taken it in its embrace.

The soldiers were arguing about something between themselves, scrutinizing the ice-hole and measuring something. Olena did not move. Her eyes were fixed on the little waves coming up through the hole and diving under the ice again. . . . Now her baby was well hidden and no one would ever find it. The ice lay over it like a solid shield and the snow covered it like a feather bed. Blue snow stretched everywhere as far as the eye could see and the water ran on its invisible journey under the snow, under the ice, well protected from German eyes. "Where is it running to?" Olena asked herself, and remembered that it was flowing towards the east. Her heart was glad—her little son was being carried towards his own people, towards the free land where there were no German fetters. Perhaps he will come up somewhere, in some other ice-hole. People will see him and guess what happened. They will look at the little head, brained by a bullet, and they will understand. They will bury him properly, her little mite, bury him in his native earth. Or perhaps he would not come up anywhere, and only in the spring, when the ice melts and the brook floods the fields with its turbulent waters, would the people find the little body?

The soldiers were arguing about something—they walked away a few paces and again measured something. One of them hit the edge of the ice-hole a blow with the butt of his rifle, breaking off a large piece of ice. A long dark crack showed on the snow. The ice tilted and slipped into the water; the green edge of the ice-hole gleamed a little further away.

Footsteps came crunching along the path. The soldiers turned round. Captain Kurt Werner was coming down into the gully. The soldiers sprang to attention. Olena never so much as turned her head. She was still on her knees staring at the water, at the little glistening ripples.

The captain pushed her with his foot. She turned her face to him, but her eyes were blank.

"Here, you! We'll settle your hash in another minute! Where are the guerillas?"

He was shaking with impotent rage. Just after he had sent Olena away with the soldiers a telephone message had come through from headquarters. He was instructed to obtain information of the whereabouts of the guerillas at all costs. Headquarters had reason to believe that the majority of the guerilla band were inhabitants of the village in which his, Werner's, company was stationed. He was to get the required information—how he did it was his own concern. And this cursed bitch here, who had it in her power to say the words which would satisfy

headquarters, was silent as if she were bewitched. The captain was beside himself with rage, because, after saying the last word and giving his final order, he had to come all the way down here, chase around in the frost and snow and again question this woman, again look at her horrible, inhuman, yellow, bruised and swollen face. He was in despair, he was even prepared to plead with this stubborn embittered woman, to entreat her—but he knew it would be useless. Easy for the staff officers at H.Q. to say “we categorically demand.” It was easy to make categoric demands! “At all costs!” Well, he thought, he certainly had done his best and fate itself had sent him the best possible instrument—a new-born baby. And even that could not move this woman. . . .

“Where’s the whelp?” he asked the soldiers.

“We threw him in the ice-hole,” the younger of the two said apprehensively. What could have happened to make the captain come here in person and inquire about the child when only a quarter of an hour ago he himself had given the order to clear it away? The soldier was scared. Perhaps he had done wrong, perhaps he had misunderstood the order.

But Werner shrugged his shoulders.

“Listen, you! Where are the guerillas?”

Olena gave no reply. With the same attention with which she had gazed at the water she now examined the face of the captain. She saw everything down to the slightest detail. Fair eyebrows, one hair of which was longer than the others and comically curled up towards the forehead. A fragment of cigarette paper, a tiny white spot stuck to one corner of the mouth. A network of red veins on the cheek, fluttering eyelids, whitish eyelashes. One of the captain’s ears is frostbitten, it is swollen and larger than the other.

“What are you staring at? I’m asking you where the guerillas are.”

He saw that his question never reached her, that she did not hear him, that he would never get anything out of her. Suddenly he conceived a violent dislike for her. He was sorry he could not get her child into his hands a second time. He had killed it too quickly and too easily. He should have skinned it alive in front of her, cut off its ears, put out its eyes. Perhaps then she would at last have given way, she might have been conquered. But he had been in too much of a hurry and now they would ring him up again to-morrow from H.Q. because, fool that he was, he had informed them that he had arrested a woman guerilla fighter. Of course, no one at headquarters would understand

that it was impossible to extort any information from a woman. And his dearest friends would cheerfully stretch out a leg for him to stumble over and would take good care to let his superiors know that Captain Kurt Werner didn't know how to treat arrested persons and couldn't obtain statements—obviously he was too soft-hearted, too tolerant with the local bandit population. . . .

He bit his lip and snatched the rifle from one of the soldiers so suddenly that the man jumped back in terror. Olena was no longer looking at the captain. Her eyes were again on the water, on its sparkle, on its uninterrupted lively play.

Werner stepped back a pace and with all his strength plunged the bayonet into the back of the kneeling woman. She fell with her face on the edge of the ice-hole. The snow she had disturbed in her fall was sifting into the hole in a thin trickle like flour out of the opening of a bin. Olena looked, her face almost touching the dark surface. The snow, as it fell into the water, suddenly took on a green colour, clotted into lumps and swirled round and round on the surface.

The captain dragged the bayonet out with an effort and struck again. Olena quivered and fell sprawling on the snow-covered ice. The strands of her dishevelled hair hung down into the water. The water seized them, ran over them and made them dance as if they were alive.

"Throw her in!" the captain commanded.

The soldiers jumped to obey and began to push the body in with the butts of their rifles. The hole was not big enough, the head fell into the water but the arms stuck out on both sides of the hole as if still resisting.

"What's this? Can't you do the simplest job?" the captain roared furiously.

The soldiers hastily took hold of the dead woman, twisted back her arms and pushed her under the ice by brute force. She sank in to the waist, then to the hips. Spurred on by the presence of their captain they kicked her further in, pushed her with their rifle-butts. Finally the water heaved as the body fell in. Now only the blue, swollen, torn feet, quite unlike a pair of human feet, were still sticking out of the hole. The soldiers hammered away with their rifle-butts at the horrible, mutilated stumps. Finally there was another splash, a gurgle, the water heaved once more and the body disappeared. A ripple ran over the edge of the hole and flowed back again on its journey to far-away lands.

The captain swore and walked back, his feet slipping on the icy path. The soldiers followed him obediently.

Down there, in the ice-hole, the dark water gurgled. The edges of the hole shone with a greenish glitter. On the trampled snow the track of the soldiers' boots could be seen for a long way. Only in one place was there a red mark, where the body of the infant had fallen the first time. The bright red stain showed up vividly on the white surface; it looked as if it would never disappear, but remain there until the sunny days of spring when the ice would melt, the snow would drip away and the freed brook would carry its turbulent waters to the distant plains, into a far-away shoreless sea, the native sea of Olena's native land.

VI

PUSSY WAS WASHING HERSELF. FEDOSSYA KRAVCHUK, SILENT and grim, brought in buckets of cold water and poured in hot water from a pot. Pussy was sitting in the tub and soaping her thin shoulders. She was not in the least embarrassed at the presence of her lover, who sat beside her on the settee smoking cigarette after cigarette. As if she couldn't wash in the kitchen, thought Fedossya. But, of course, she was too much the grand lady for that! The very idea! No, of course she had to show her German lover her rattling bones, and splash water all over the floor, just to give Fedossya something to wipe up and clear away.

Pussy squirmed about in the warm water and frequently glanced at Kurt. He had been in a bad humour all the evening and said nothing.

"Kurt!"

He came out of his absorption.

"What is it?"

"You haven't said a word all the evening, you haven't looked at me, as if I didn't exist. . . ."

"I'm tired," he replied drily.

"I waited for you all day and you never came."

She squeezed water out of her sponge and watched the soapy trickle run down her breasts.

"A lot of time I had to-day for such things," he growled, still thinking of the expected telephone message from headquarters. He would have to tell them in the morning that he had failed to get any information out of the woman. The major would be furious. It would be interesting to know how much *he* could have achieved. The major always thought everything was simple and easy. The worst of it was that Werner was due for promotion

in the near future and this idiotic business with the guerillas might mess up everything. And yet—the guerillas were not bothering him, Werner, they were after those fellows at H.Q.—so why didn't *they* try and catch them, find their damned hiding-places. . . . But of course it was so much easier to put it all on his shoulders and make him responsible for the whole affair. Werner cursed his own stupidity and lack of foresight. What on earth made him report the arrest of this woman Kostyuk before he knew whether he could find out something from her?

He was weighing up something in his mind and Pussy felt his eyes on her.

"What's the matter?" she asked.

He went on slowly puffing at his cigarette.

"Listen," he began, obviously hesitating.

Pussy waited, raising her plucked eyebrows.

"Couldn't you have a word with your sister, eh?"

She turned round so suddenly that the water splashed out of the tub on to the floor. At that moment Fedossya came in with a bucket.

"Don't hang about here, you," he barked at Fedossya angrily.

Fedossya shrugged her shoulders and went out. Werner stood up and carefully closed the door.

"Have a word with my sister?"

"You heard me!" Werner was annoyed.

"But why on earth should I?" Pussy opened her round eyes very wide and put her head on one side in her usual way.

"You must help me. Yes, help me. Why not? You must go and talk to this schoolmistress. She can tell you a lot of things I want to know."

Pussy absent-mindedly soaked and squeezed out the sponge.

"She wouldn't tell me anything. . . ."

"It's up to you to see that she does. Explain to her that this monkey business may have unpleasant consequences. For the time being I am looking the other way, but once my patience comes to an end . . ."

"What monkey business?"

"Well, of all the silly idiots!" he shouted, losing his temper.

Pussy's feelings were hurt. She pouted and began to wash her feet with great care.

"Explain to her, that it will be better for her if she begins to work for us. Surely she isn't such a fool as to think that the Reds will ever come back here?"

Pussy gave no reply. Only then did Werner notice that she was sulking.

"What's wrong?"

"If I'm a silly idiot, how can I explain things?"

"Sulking, eh? Listen, I'm tired. I've had a very hard day. Stop playing the goat. Really it's too absurd. Well, are you going to see your sister?"

"She won't talk to me anyway."

"Why?"

She looked at him and shrugged her shoulders.

"Don't you know that no one will talk to me in the village? They look at me as if I were a leper. . . . But what do you care—you leave me alone all day. . . ."

"Same old story again. . . . Come on, pack it up. I want to talk to you seriously."

The frown on his face frightened Pussy.

"All right, but what shall I talk to her about?"

Werner glanced towards the door.

"We have information that she is in touch with the guerillas. She must tell you where they are, understand?"

"She won't tell!"

"Why make up your mind beforehand? If you handle her properly she'll tell."

The water was getting cold. Pussy dried herself slowly and carefully. Then she stretched out an arm and took her nightdress from the chair. She enjoyed the soft touch of silk on her body. The nightdress was blue crêpe-de-Chine, hand embroidered. Werner had brought it from France for his wife, had had no opportunity to give it to her and now it was Pussy who was wearing it. The silk enveloped her in soft folds and its touch was like a caress. The bath had made her drowsy and she wanted to sleep.

"Why don't you undress?" she asked peevishly.

"This is no time for sleeping. I've got to find out about the guerillas!"

Pussy sat down beside him on the settee and leant her cheek against his tunic.

"Kurt . . ."

He moved away from her impatiently.

"It's impossible to talk seriously to you."

"One doesn't talk at night!" she said, pouting, and smoothed her hair back behind her ear. But when she saw that he was getting seriously angry she quickly changed her tone.

"All right, but how do you know she knows?"

"Don't worry, I know well enough. That's none of your

business. But you can throw out a hint to her, that I know everything and if she doesn't tell, I'll have her arrested."

"What? Arrest her?"

"What did you think—that because she's your sister she can work against us and we're going to look on and do nothing about it?"

Pussy shrugged her shoulders.

"What do I care, anyway? Arrest her if you like. Makes no difference to me. I'll go and see her if you like. But you'll see, she won't let me get beyond her doorstep."

"Try at all events."

"Very well, I'll try," she said in a conciliatory tone, thinking that in any case it wouldn't be until to-morrow and there was no point in quarrelling with Kurt about it to-day.

"Come to bed."

He stood up and stumbled over the bath tub.

"Where's that woman? Really, Pussy, you might wash in the kitchen."

"In the kitchen? In that woman's kitchen?" Pussy shuddered with loathing.

Werner flapped his hand. Fedossya, her teeth clenched, took away the buckets, carried away the tub and wiped the water from the floor. Pussy watched her with satisfaction from the bed. Should she tell Kurt about Vassya straight away? No, let the old woman worry a bit longer; let her wait, there was always time enough to tell. . . .

The door closed. Werner undressed, threw his boots noisily on to the floor, and put out the lamp. Fedossya poured the dirty water into buckets and went outside to empty them. The wind hit her in the face, the sentry looked round, but seeing her with the buckets in her hand said nothing. She made a circle round the house and turned towards the sty, where the manure heap was. The water made a loud splash and that instant she heard a resonant whisper: "Mother!"

She staggered and dropped the bucket. The snow gave light enough and behind the sty a dark outline was visible against the whiteness. It was a cap of familiar shape. It took Fedossya's breath away.

"Who's there?" she whispered, although she knew already. With a groan she sank to her knees, stretched out her arms and felt the coarse cloth of the overcoat, the leather belt. On the grey fur of the cap she saw clearly the five-pointed star. A sob rose in her throat. The Red Army man was startled.

"What's up? Anything wrong?"

"It's you . . . it's you . . . it's you . . ." she whispered, choking on the words. She thought she was dreaming and her heart raced with joy.

"It's you, it's you!"

The Red Army man bent down to her and shook her by the shoulder. In the faint snowlight he saw her face, wet with tears, lit up by a beaming smile.

"What is it?"

"Nothing, nothing. . . ." Fedossya tried with all her might to conquer her emotion. And suddenly she remembered the sentry. She clutched the Red Army man's sleeve.

"There are Germans in my cottage! The Germans are in the village!"

"I know. I want to talk to you, mother. Do you live here?"

"Of course, born here too."

"We must find out how things are here. . . ."

"Listen, son, there is a sentry at my house, if I stay away too long he will come to look for me. You wait here. I'll run home and get out again so he won't see me. You go a bit further away, down there in the shed behind the sty—there is straw there and you won't be in the draught."

He looked at her fixedly with suddenly aroused suspicion. She understood.

"What are you thinking of, son? Why, I am from here, from the collective farm . . . my own son, Red Army man, is lying dead down there in the gully—has been there a month. The German dogs won't let us bury them. . . . They've stripped them naked. . . ."

It was the feeling audible in her voice rather than her words that was so convincing that the lad felt ashamed.

"Sorry, mother, but you know we've got to be careful."

"You go along now, I'll be back. . . ."

She picked up the buckets with trembling hands and went back to the cottage. She walked past the sentry and it cost her an effort to suppress a giggle. Go on, do your sentry-go, stamp your feet! Our boys are here! Down there by the sty is a Red Army man and you know nothing about it while you guard the officer's slut, the officer's bed. . . . Go on, guard them, it'll be all up with you soon. . . ."

She carefully closed the door giving on to the passage, and moved the kitchen settee about as if she were preparing to go to bed. She heard the German snoring inside. Fedossya quietly crept out into the passage and up to the loft where there was a

board loose She slipped through the opening and cautiously crawled along the roof Her long skirt hampered her and she thought 'how funny, an old woman like me climbing about on the roof like a tomcat,' and she laughed silently in her heart The wind rustled in the thatch and the sentry on the other side of the house could hear nothing She reached the ground and listened for a moment with her heart beating fast No, the sentry never suspected there was something going on here at the back He knew there was a blank wall at the back and so he kept to the front, near the windows 'And all the time it would be easy to get into the cottage from the back,' she thought, with elation.

She crept towards the sty as stealthily as a cat and suddenly went cold all over, there was no one there The little shed was empty too Could it all have been a vision, a dream born of grief and suffering? No, that was impossible

"Where are you?" she asked in a cautious whisper

The straw in the shed rustled Fedossya beamed Of course he was there And not alone, either There were three of them—three! She was overwhelmed with joy to see two more They squatted down near the entrance to the shed Fedossya squatted down with them

"How we have waited, waited! How we've looked for you day and night!" she keened in a sing-song whisper, stroking the sleeve of one of the soldiers "And at last you have come, have come . . ."

"Enough of that, mother, we've got to talk to you "

"If you must, you must . . . But aren't you hungry?" she asked, suddenly remembering her duties as a hostess

The Red Army man laughed

"No thanks We didn't come here to eat "

"Then ask your questions "

"You belong to this village?"

"Of course, to this village, where else?" Fedossya was surprised "Here I was born, here I've lived "

"We want to know all about it Where are the Germans? Where do they keep all their gear?"

She clasped her hands in entreaty

"Will our side attack the village?"

"Yes, yes but first we must find out everything "

"Well," Fedossya rested a hand on each knee "Our village is large, three hundred families Here are two roads, criss-cross At the crossing a green, where the church was, now only the ruins are there "

"Wait a bit, mother."

They unfolded a map and bent over it, using their coats as a screen. An electric torch gleamed.

"Here it is. Right! Cross-roads, green, all correct. . . ."

"On the green, by the church, they've put guns."

"How many?"

Fedossya reflected.

"Let me see . . . one, two . . . three . . . four. Yes, four! There's a big house near the church. It used to be the village soviet, now it's their headquarters . . . and the prison . . . there are five hostages there now."

"Where else are there any Germans?"

"Nearest the green one might say in every house. Here on the edge, where my house is, there aren't so many but still there are a few. There are more guns under the limes as you leave the village, but those are different ones, smaller. . . ."

"Ack-ack, perhaps?"

"May be ack-ack, who knows. . . . They point upwards, thin little things."

"I get you. Any machine-guns?"

"Yes, of course. . . . Down there, straight along and then on the left in the houses. They have made holes in the walls and behind each hole is a machine-gun."

The Red Army man, bending over the map drew little crosses and circles on it.

"They drove the people out of those houses. Germans live in them now—wait a bit, how many would there be . . . ? One, two, five—in five houses . . . and in one more on the way from here to the green. . . ."

"Are there many of them?"

"Hard to tell. . . . They come and go, only their captain sits tight. . . . They say there are about two hundred of them."

"Many sentries?"

"No, they just stick to the houses, like that one in front of mine. They're scared at night, and don't stray far, always in twos. In the daytime they are bolder, but in the night they are afraid, though there is an order that as soon as it is dark, no one may go outside. If they see anyone, they never ask who goes there, they just shoot. . . ."

"Any bridges along the road?"

"Bridges? No. Just a road."

"Any woods?"

"No woods here. Only a few trees in the gardens and even those are nearly all gone; these devils have cut them down for

fuel. Fond of warmth, they are. Along the road beyond the church there are a few limes. But no woods anywhere near—all naked plains for a long way around. Some bushes down in the gully, that's all. It's difficult here for fuel, we burn cowdung."

She looked round alarmed.

"What is it?"

"Wait, I'll go and see whether the sentry hasn't thought of having a look round at the back here." She went quietly outside and listened. The wind moaned drearily, battled in the gully, rustled the thatch on the roof. When it calmed down for an instant she could hear the heavy regular pacing of the sentry and the crunching of the snow under his boots. Fedossya came back.

"It's all right, he's still on sentry-go."

The Red Army men folded their map.

"We must go now. Thanks, mother."

"What for? My Vassya was in the Red Army. The Germans killed him right here, near the village."

The electric torch went out.

"When can we expect you?"

"That remains to be seen. . . . It's up to the commander . . . according to circumstances."

"What circumstances? Just you hurry up, it's time . . . we've been waiting for you a whole month, looking for you to come. . . ."

"It's not an easy matter, mother."

"I know it isn't easy, but it isn't easy for us either. . . . Do your best, boys, do what you can."

Suddenly she remembered: "Wait! There's something else——"

"What is it?"

"Their chief, that is to say their commander, is in my house. . . . There's nobody else, only the sentry in front. He is sleeping like the dead, with his hussy. The sentry could be killed, or if not, I could let you in quietly, through the roof. You could catch him, like a quail. . . ."

The eyes of the youngest Red Army man sparkled.

"Come on, boys!"

"Wait a minute. Think first. . . ."

"What's there to think about? Drag out the blighter by the scruff of the neck and have done with it."

"Yeah, it's easy to make a fool of yourself. All right, you do him in—and then? Next morning there's a row they 'phone up

headquarters and their command sends such a lot of men here, that our whole plan goes up in smoke. . . ."

"That's right, so it would. . . ."

"A fine reconnaissance it would be! Now they're sitting quietly, feeling nice and comfortable, you can see for yourself, their captain has only one sentry to guard him. But if we frighten them, we can spoil the whole show."

"All right, but I did want that fritz badly."

"Another time. Now we're going home quietly."

"And where may your home be?" Fedossya wanted to know.

"We only call it that, mother. Our homes are far away, but in war 'home' is one's unit. You could show us the best way. On our way here we were nearly drowned in the snow."

"I'll show you! Down here, straight down into the gully and then along the brook, along the brook. Only be careful there because our dead lie there unburied. . . . The brook will lead you out into the plain, there are two villages there, Okhaby and Zelentsi: only the Germans are there, same as here."

"We know that—so long as we don't meet anyone round here."

"You needn't worry about that. This sentry in front of my house is the last one, there aren't any more. Walk slowly and stop when the wind stops, or else the fritz might hear the snow creak."

Three stooping shadows followed her, stopping when she stopped.

"Here's the gully. Go straight down here; take care, it's slippery."

"Well, see you later, mother. Thanks for everything. You're a real good sort."

"Good-bye, boys. Hurry up, come back soon."

"We'll do our best. You had better go home. It's cold."

"Don't worry about that. I'm used to it."

Fedossya stood on the edge of the gully and looked down. The patrol moved quickly along the path and it was increasingly difficult to distinguish them in their white cloaks against the snow. Finally they completely melted into the dark, and vanished into the night and the flurry of snow as if they had never existed. She felt as if she had escaped from prison for a short space, breathed freely for a minute and was now voluntarily returning to her chains. She looked with loathing at the dark shape of her cottage, where the German was sleeping with his slut and where she had to go and listen to his hateful snoring.

Yes, he was still snoring, whistling through his nose and his

hussy was muttering in her sleep. Fedossya smiled with revengeful pleasure: 'It's all up with you soon. The Red Army will come, they will go straight into the room and drag you off the feather bed!'

Would she, Fedossya, hear them come creeping close, or wouldn't she wake until they were right inside the cottage? No, she knew she could not sleep another wink until they came, until the village was freed.

The snow crunched under the sentry's boots. Werner snored, whistling through his nose. Everything remained unchanged, as it had been yesterday and the day before. And yet it was quite different. For the first time in a month, for the first time since Vassya was killed, Fedossya's heart swelled with gladness. She felt it blaze, flare up, warm her and rise from her heart like a tall flame. She put her hand over her mouth to hold back the cry that was struggling to express her magnificent happiness for all to hear. As yet no one knew of this happiness except she herself—no one else in the whole village. They had all waited with unwavering faith, but she alone knew that now it was possible to wait in a different way. Now one could speculate as to when it would happen. To-day, to-morrow, the day after? How long would it take the three scouts to get back to their unit? And how long would it take the unit to reach the village? One day, two days, three days? Fedossya knew that it could not be more than three days. It would be too cruel, too stupid if the five hostages in the Kommandantur were to die.

Werner had given them three days. It suddenly passed through Fedossya's mind that these three days were not a term set for the life of the hostages, but that during those three days a black pit was opening to swallow up the Germans. Before the three days were out the Germans would look into the relentless eyes of the Red Army men and see death.

In every one of the three hundred cottages of the village human beings were suffering, waiting, weeping with unshaken confidence, finding strength in the magic words: "Our people will come back!" But out of the whole village only Fedossya knew for certain not only that they would come—she had never had any doubts about that—but that they were already on their way, that final sentence had already been passed on the German hordes. It had come too late to save Olena, but it would be in time for the five in the Kommandantur. It was impossible that it should not be in time for them.

That night Gaplik, the headman, stayed in the Kommandantur until a late hour. Using the accounts of the collective farm as a guide, he was meticulously calculating the exact quantity of grain which each householder was to give up. The German sergeant, a book-keeper by trade, was helping him. Gaplik sweated and got all muddled up in his figures. The lamp smoked. The soldiers watched the two men at the table with sleepy eyes. The headman computed and added, multiplied and divided, constantly making mistakes which elicited angry remarks from the sergeant.

Gaplik tried to keep his mind on the work but without success. He could not escape from the nagging thought that all these figures and calculations might prove useless. More than likely they would. It was easy to write down things on paper, easy to read them out aloud, it was even comparatively easy to tell each householder exactly how much he or she owed the German state. But that was not enough—papers and forms wouldn't satisfy the captain or the higher command. What they wanted were deliveries. They wanted bread, not papers—and Gaplik doubted very much whether anyone in the village had any intention of giving it to them. For which refusal, when all was said and done it would be he, Gaplik, who would be made responsible. The captain's threats sounded convincing enough and the headman knew that he had the power to carry out his threats any time he liked.

Nor had Gaplik's idea of taking hostages produced any results whatsoever. The hostages were locked up, but for all that no one had come to the Kommandantur with a statement about the young criminal. That again would be his, Gaplik's responsibility. The captain had to find a scapegoat, he had to have one in order to prove his zeal in the eyes of his superiors. And the scapegoat would, of course, be he, the headman.

"What the devil are you scribbling there?" the sergeant shouted at him. "You've messed up the whole column. Now, we'll have to do the whole thing all over again. What on earth are you thinking about?"

Gaplik smiled submissively. What was he thinking about? He could hardly tell the sergeant that. He bent even lower over his paper and scratched with his pen with even greater zeal.

Finally the calculations were finished. Outside the night was very dark and the wind shrieked piercingly. Gaplik slowly buttoned up his sheepskin.

"Perhaps somebody could see me home," he said at last. There was a sentry in front of his house, but before he could

reach the protection of the sentry's rifle he would have to walk alone some distance through the village in the black and stormy night. The sergeant shrugged his shoulders.

"What? You afraid of going home alone? Sorry, I can't send a soldier without permission from the captain."

"What about yourself?" Gaplik suggested timidly.

The sergeant banged his fist on the table.

"Of all the crazy notions! Headquarters may ring us up any minute and you have the cheek to ask me to leave my post and play nursemaid to you! In any case, what are you afraid of? They daren't so much as stick their noses out of doors at night in this village."

Gaplik made no reply and slunk out of the room. On the threshold he stopped and hesitated. After the light in the room the darkness seemed even blacker, almost tangible, impenetrable, as thick as tar. He stood still a moment until his eyes got used to the darkness and he could distinguish the faint outlines of the trees and roofs on the other side of the street. Then he turned up the collar of his sheepskin coat and grimly set out for home. He was being treated like a dog, he thought bitterly. Every German had the right to shout at him, every one of them could vent his bad temper on him. The captain, the sergeant, even any private considered himself vastly superior to him, Gaplik, and all the time he had to work like a horse and then risk his life on top of everything else. He looked round fearfully.

Curfew orders were all very well, but in this cursed village anything might happen. The sergeant himself had been afraid to go out, the telephone was only an excuse; the sergeant had simply funked it. All the same, he had driven Gaplik out into the dark night, even though there was danger at every step.

He tried to sneak across the village, making as little noise as possible, but the snow creaked and crunched underfoot, and the wind, as if on purpose, died down for minutes on end, making the sound of his footsteps, as he imagined, audible to the whole village. Suddenly it seemed to him that someone was standing at the turning. He stopped in his tracks, chilled with terror. The shadow did not stir. Gaplik waited breathlessly for the next move.

For an instant he thought of going back and spending the night in the Kommandantur. If the worst came to the worst he could stay there until morning. But he was afraid to turn his back on the something that seemed to wait on the corner if he took his eyes off it, it might leap at him and

With a determination bred of despair he moved forward

And saw that the something was only a roadside bush. How could he have forgotten the existence of that bush! Why, he had passed it in the daytime times out of number!

But just at that moment Gaplik's foot slipped and in that split second he realized that something terrible was happening to him. He was suffocating—something was blinding his eyes, gagging his mouth, smothering his head. He tried to cry out, but a vigorous blow knocked him down. Gaplik felt himself being lifted up and carried away with his feet off the ground. The snow creaked and he heard somebody breathing hard. Then a door squeaked on its hinges. He was thrown down roughly, he felt the touch of hands and understood that he was being bound. Finally the cloth covering his head was pulled off. He blinked. A flickering lamp threw a feeble light on the interior of the hut and the people in it. Gaplik recognized Alexander, the lame groom, and the sun-tanned face of Frossya Grokhach. He began to tremble, his bald head quivered on his long neck, and he was quite unable to control this tremor.

A wrinkled little woman, whom Gaplik did not know, said "Sit down, Alexander. You can read and write and everything must be taken down, so that it should be all right and proper, according to rule."

They sat down at the table. Gaplik watched them in an absolute frenzy of terror. Shadows flitted over their faces as the reddish flame of the little lamp flickered and smoked.

"Stand up, you! You are before your judges," said another woman, and vigorously blew her nose on to the floor.

He stood up with an effort.

"Stand here, you viper! Why are you fidgeting about? Stand up like a man!"

"You're asking too much of him, Terplikha," Frossya commented.

Terplikha did not understand.

"He must stand up properly. This is a court of law. We could have done for him then and there on the road. But as we are giving him a fair trial, he must behave decently."

Gaplik was shivering all over with fear. He was in a hut almost next door to the German Kommandantur, in a village under German occupation, but he, Gaplik, was standing with his hands bound in front of a table, and behind the table were sitting a handful of women and a lame horse-groom who declared that they were his judges, that this was a court of law and that they were going to try him, Gaplik, the headman appointed by the German authorities. And this was not a horrible dream, but reality.

"Well, what's your name, you scum?" Terpilikha asked

Gaplik wanted to reply, but the words stuck in his throat, all he could utter was an inarticulate sound

"What's this? Are you pretending to be a baby, you and your crooning. Don't play the fool here, but speak up! As if we had time to coddle a bit of dung like you. And you, Alexander, be sure to take down everything. Well, what is your name?"

"You know it well enough," Gaplik muttered sullenly

"I didn't ask you, you viper, whether I knew or didn't know. A trial is a trial, and you are bound to answer questions. What is your name?"

"Gaplik, Peter"

"Peter, is it? My father was Peter. Pity to waste a good name on such vermin as you!"

"Easy, Aunt Gorpina, let me take it down."

"Go on, write it down, write everything down properly. What's the next thing? Oh, yes, your age?"

"Forty-eight"

"Forty-eight. How could the earth carry such muck as you all those years? Write, write, Alexander!"

"It's all been put down long ago. Go on with the questions."

"Well, what comes next? Oh, yes. . . you're the headman, aren't you?"

"Yes, I'm the headman," he confirmed drearily

"Headman, indeed! Flying high, eh? And what were you before that?"

He was silent, his eyes on the ground

"Well? Ashamed to tell us? Must have been something even worse than headman?"

He was silent and stared obstinately at the points of his boots

"Hey, you! If I clip you one on the ear, you'll start talking fast enough. Come on, answer!"

"Wait, Gorpina. I'll ask him," Alexander intervened

She opened her mouth to object, but thought better of it and flapped her hand. "All right, you do it, let's see what you can do with him."

Alexander scrutinized Gaplik closely. Then he asked in a calm, quiet voice. "Have you been in jail?"

He still kept his eyes on his boots

"Did you do a long stretch?"

"Long enough."

"How long?"

Silence.

"What for?"

Silence again

"Are you of peasant stock, or working-class or of the ruling class?"

Terpilikha was preparing to intervene when he suddenly replied "Peasant stock"

"Kulak, eh?"

"So he's a kulak!" Terpilikha announced triumphantly "So he wanted to suck up a bit more of the peasant's blood, the old bloodsucker!"

"Wait a bit, Gorpina "

"Why should I wait? Is this a trial or isn't it? I've the same rights as you Or more Who was it who said all the time that it couldn't be done? And now we've done it "

"Quite true only wait while I ask him some more questions "

"All right, go ahead, ask him!"

"So you were a kulak and when did you escape from prison?"

"As soon as the war started "

"And you were trying to get home, eh?"

"Yes "

"And where may that 'home' be?"

"Near Rostov "

"Oh, yes, near Rostov . and where did you meet the Germans?"

"Same place, near Rostov "

"And that was where they recruited you, eh?"

"Yes "

"Wait a bit, Alexander, we must ask him why he was in prison "

At once an expression of invincible obstinacy appeared on the face of the accused

"So you won't tell us why you went to prison?"

Silence

"Then you were in prison before the kulaks were dealt with?"

"Yes "

"Hm Been out with Petlhura?"

"Yes "

Terpilikha raised her hands in amazement

"With Petlhura, just think of that!"

"It's all clear now," began Alexander "Kulak, bandit, Petlhura man. You were against the Soviets from the very start, eh?"

"From the start," Gaplik quietly agreed.

"And finally you took service with the Germans

Terpilikha jumped out from behind the table

"It's because of him that Levanyuk was hanged, it's because of him that five people are in the Kommandantur waiting for death. He went with the Germans to requisition cows, he dragged the cattle out of the byres, he took my last cow—what did he care whether my children starved? He took the last cows from the Kalsayuks, from the Migors, from the Kachurovs!"

"And from the Lissys and the Smolyachenkos," Flossya added

"He helped the Germans rob the village "

"It's all clear, no more speechifying "

"Hush, you women!" Terpilikha intervened, having made more noise than all the rest put together. "If it's a trial, it's a trial and everything must be told "

"But what more is there to tell? We know everything. Every day we see how people perish because of him, how blood and tears are shed every day "

"Well, what is being proposed?" Terpilikha asked ceremoniously

"Kill the viper!"

"Kill him!"

"Well, comrades, it has been moved that the viper should be killed. All those in favour please raise their hands "

Every hand was raised

"Who is against? Who abstains?"

"None "

"Well, then, comrades, it's all clear. Alexander, write it down and read it out "

Alexander scratched with his pen on the paper for a long time. All waited in silence. Finally he stood up.

"This court, consisting of Alexander Ovssi, Gorpina Terpilikha, Flossya Grokhach "

"Not Flossya, Euphrosina," Flossya corrected, and Alexander bent over the paper

"Euphrosina Grokhach, Natalia Lemesh, and Pelagea Puzyr, having examined the accused Peter Gaplik, kulak, criminal and headman in the service of the Germans, have unanimously condemned him to death "

Gaplik went deathly pale and stared at them with his eyes starting out of his head

"Well, everything seems to be in order," Terpilikha announced

"Wait a minute," Frossya said "We have sentenced him all right, but how are we going to carry out the sentence?"

They looked at each other, nonplussed

"True, how are we going to do it?"

"Best hang him," Pelagea Puzyr suggested

"Where shall we hang him? Here in the house?"

"Nonsense Knock him on the head with a batten and have done with it"

"We can't shoot him, got no firearms"

"What, shoot? So the Germans should hear it and catch us all?"

Gaphik began to shake They were discussing him, discussing the best means to put him to death, just as if he were not there at all, as if he were already a lifeless lump of flesh Terror overcame him, he felt he was going to be sick and he sank to his knees

"Good people have mercy on me! I have sinned against you, but I swear I will never sin again"

He grovelled, beat his head against the floor and against the women's feet They shrank back in disgust

"Keep away! Huh, you vermin!"

Gaphik began to weep Tears ran down his cheeks, leaving dirty marks

"Good people, I entreat you, I entreat you by the heads of your children!"

"Our children? It's because of you, son of a bitch, that our children are perishing, all because of you!"

"They made me do it, they forced me!" Gaphik sobbed in despair

"Stop that howling, or I'll fetch you one on the head with a log So they made you do it, you poor innocent and who pushed through to Rostov to meet the Germans? Eh?"

"Have mercy, have mercy!" he gasped, grovelling on the floor.

They looked at him, sick with loathing

"Faugh, it makes one sick to look at you Couldn't live like a man, and now he can't die like a man!" Pelagea said indignantly

"Listen, women, there's no point in wasting any more time on him He might bring the Germans about our ears with his howling"

Alexander went up to Gaphik from behind and threw a noose over his neck

"For the good cause," he said, and spat in his hand Frossya screamed.

"Quiet!"

Gaplik's fingers bent convulsively and clutched at the floor. His legs twitched and then stretched. He was dead.

"Come on, give a hand. . . . Frossya, take hold!"

He took hold of the body by the arms. Frossya took the legs. Terpilikha cautiously looked outside.

All was quiet except for the howling of the wind.

"Come on, hurry up, into the well with him."

There was an old well outside the house, dry for many a year. Now it was half full of snow. They threw the body into it. It fell softly, making no sound. Alexander took a shovel and threw snow on top.

"He'll be all right there until the spring. In the spring we'll have to get him out. By morning he'll be all covered with snow and not a trace of him left."

"How are we to get home now?"

"No need to. Why wander about at night. We were lucky once, might be unlucky a second time," Alexander objected. "Plenty of room in the house, sleep here until morning and in the morning you can all go home and no-one'll be any the wiser."

They settled down as best they could on the floor and the benches. But they found it difficult to sleep.

"Alexander, you put those minutes away in a safe place—when our people come back, we must have it to show."

"I'll put it away where no one can find it, don't you worry."

"You see, Alexander, it all went off all right," Terpilikha rubbed it in once more.

"Why shouldn't it go off all right?" he muttered, already half asleep.

VII

THE DOOR BLEW TO WITH A BANG. FEDOSSYA JUMPED AND dropped the bucket she was carrying. The water ran in a broad stream over the clay floor of the kitchen.

"Clumsy clod!" shouted Werner furiously, as he jumped to get his beautifully polished boots out of the way of the dirty water.

Fedossya made no reply. Her heart thumped and raced in her breast. She mopped up the water with a cloth, but her hands trembled and she went over the same already dry places several times, leaving pools of water in other places. No, to-day she was no use for any work. Every sound, every rustle made her jump as if she had been struck. She was all agog with expecta-

tion Why, *they* might arrive any minute, *they* were already on their way

It weighed heavily on her mind that no one else in the whole village knew about it, except herself Of course, it was better that way, but it was hard, waiting like this all by herself! Her heart lost a beat, her breath came short— Why, *they* might come any minute now—any minute

"You must work out the best way to manage it" Werner threw the words over his shoulder to Pussy, who was still lying in bed He went out, slamming the door, and Fedossya jumped again

Pussy lay with her arms thrown back over her head and bit her lip She didn't like the tone of Werner's parting words As if she were his slave who must fulfil his every command He couldn't find the guerillas, although he had all these soldiers at his orders, and telephones and everything—and yet he wanted her, Pussy, with whom not a soul in the village would so much as pass the time of day—yes, he demanded that she should find them for him Pussy was growing angrier and angrier He was certainly getting above himself Did he think that just for his silk nightdress and his miserable stockings he had the right to shout at her?

She knew perfectly well that nothing would and nothing could come of any approach to her sister They had ceased to be on speaking terms with each other long before the war Olga had come to the little market town several times to attend conferences or classes, but had never come to see her there She was obviously of the opinion that Pussy was not worth visiting. According to her, it was some sort of dreadful crime that Pussy did not work, did not run her hands with washing clothes, did not scrub floors or learn tractor-driving Olga wanted everybody to be like her She was as strong as a horse and forgot how weak her sister was Olga never bothered about her looks, just wound her thick plaits of hair round her head any old how In winter her hands were chapped with the frost and in summer she was tanned as brown as any gipsy Pussy stretched out her hand towards the mirror hanging above the bed and began to scrutinize herself, her thin plucked eyebrows, her black curls, her round eyes with their black lashes, her thin lips which revealed her sharp triangular teeth

No, she was no good for the sort of work Olga was doing. Besides, why should she work? Seryosha had been in the Army and had had his pay, quite sufficient for the few things that could be bought in the little market town But Olga didn't understand

In her opinion Seryosha was having a bad time. But why? Pussy couldn't make it out. He had a wife who could dress well even with the miserable rags one could get hold of, whose hair was done beautifully, who took good care of her hands and looked better than any of these small-town frumps, who were always running about, always in a hurry, always doing something. And the fact that they had no children, that Pussy didn't want any children? Well, she didn't want any and that was that. Plenty of children about without her adding to them. Seryosha had married her, Pussy, and not some imaginary children, and when they got married Seryosha had said nothing about wanting children. And yet these trifles had been enough to make Olga treat her own sister like a stranger. How then would she treat her now? What did she expect of Pussy anyway? There had been no news of Seryosha at all, not since he went to the front five whole months ago. He must have been killed or taken prisoner—or else how was it that in five months not a single letter or postcard had come from him? Who knew how long this war would last? What should she do, wait a year or two, perhaps even longer, and then finally starve to death, or what? No, she had acted very sensibly. What if Kurt was a German? The Germans were masters now, they ruled and would continue to rule. The Bolsheviks were finished, that was quite clear. Everything would be perfectly all right if only Kurt hadn't been so cross and irritable these last few days. He was being so very rude to her and now he was demanding this interview with Olga. Pussy knew that she would never dare attempt to see her sister. But how could she escape from this mess? And anyway, who had told Kurt that Olga was her sister?

Pussy got up and dressed slowly. She was in a bad temper. This was the last straw, that Kurt should make such demands on her. Didn't he have his spies, his informers, the whole machinery for such jobs?

Pussy carelessly threw the bedspread on the bed and took Werner's tunic from the chair to hang it up. A paper rustled in the pocket of the tunic. Pussy glanced towards the door and quickly took out the paper. It was a letter in a long blue envelope, with a German address on it. She could not read German, but she took the letter out of the envelope all the same. The blue envelope intrigued her.

The four pages of the blue letter were covered with writing in a small and regular hand. A dried and pressed flower was stuck in the top corner of the first page. Pussy pressed the paper to her nose. It smelled of some foreign scent. There could be

no doubt about it, the letter was from a woman Pussy bit her lip until the blood came So a woman was writing to Kurt from there, from Germany, on fine quality paper, in a small regular hand Of course, the letter might be from anyone—his mother, for instance, but the flower?

Pussy would have given anything to read that letter and find out what this unknown woman had written to Kurt She glanced at the date It was quite a recent letter, it must have arrived yesterday Kurt was wearing another tunic to-day and had forgotten the letter in his pocket Up to now she had never seen any letters or photographs in his possession

None? Pussy thought hard Of course, he had another wallet, with which he never parted and which he never allowed her to touch What could be in that wallet? And of course his mail was brought to him to the Kommandantur and not here He could easily keep letters and photographs in that drawer of his desk, which he always locked so carefully whenever he left the room After all, what did she really know about him? Only what he himself had told her At the beginning, when she agreed to come and live with him, he gave her the solemn promise that he would take her with him to Dresden and marry her there This was no time to get married, that was true, and she understood that it was necessary to wait In any case it wasn't so very important

Until to-day she had felt quite confident—she knew that she was pleasing Kurt But now Kurt's peremptory demand that she should pump Olga for information made her see certain things in a new light Why did he never mention Dresden now and why did he always change the subject whenever she brought it up herself? Why was he always too busy to bother about her now, why was he so cross and irritable? She, Pussy, had not changed, she was just as she had been in the beginning, when the little market town was occupied by the Germans and Kurt was billeted on her It was Kurt who had changed, Kurt who was different . . . and now this letter on top of everything else . . .

She realized that it was no use sitting there with the letter in her hand—she could not read it anyway Besides, if Kurt happened to come in, there would be a row He was always telling her not to touch his papers

Pussy put the blue sheet back into the pocket and hung up the tunic She made up her mind to keep a watchful eye on Kurt, find out who wrote to him and also whether his recent rudeness to her was due merely to overwork and nerves or to something more serious

In the kitchen Fedossya was rattling the crockery and the noise irritated Pussy beyond endurance.

"Can't you make less noise out there?" she cried shrilly.

Fedossya looked in through the open door and Pussy caught a very strange look in her eyes. No, this was not the cold hatred and contempt which she had always seen up to now in the eyes of Fedossya. Now there was triumph there, some private joy, and a new fire. Pussy felt annoyed. What had the old woman to be so pleased about? She had probably listened at the keyhole and heard the rude tone Kurt was adopting towards Pussy. So even this peasant woman had already spotted there was something wrong and was enjoying it.

She remembered that she could take her revenge on the old woman. She had not yet told Kurt about Fedossya's son lying dead in the gully. For the first two days she had deliberately refrained from doing so in order to torment Fedossya and later, when Kurt began to bother her and insist that she should see her sister, she had simply forgotten all about it. But now she remembered.

"You wait, I'll tell my husband to-day, as soon as he comes in, I'll tell him," she threatened.

Fedossya laughed maliciously, put her hands on her hips and looked Pussy over from head to heels.

"What do I care! Tell him, tell your 'husband'!" she replied boldly, ironically stressing the word 'husband.' "Tell him, or I can tell him myself, as you don't seem to have much to say to him nowadays. Tell him, tell him a hundred times if you like! Get dressed, run to the Kommandantur, run as fast as your legs will carry you!"

Pussy stared at her in surprise.

"What do you mean?"

"Nothing. What makes you look so surprised? You wanted to tell him and I'm only saying: tell him if you want to! That's all you live for, anyway, to spy on us and carry tales to the Germans. Why not go then, and tell them what you know?"

"So I will, you can be sure; so I will."

"That's what I'm saying: tell him. Why only threaten to? You won't frighten me with your threats."

"They'll take your Vassya away from you, you know."

"Let them. They've already taken him away a month ago, they can't take him away more than that."

"Then why do you go there every day?"

"Because I do. None of your business. And if they take him, I won't go any more."

"Kurt will have you arrested. You know very well that you are not allowed to hang about there."

"Huh, how frightened I am! Scared to death! I'm trembling all over, can't you see?"

Fedosya came into the room. Now she was no longer sarcastic. Her dark eyes blazed.

"It's you who should be afraid! You! Do you hear? Tremble and weep with fright."

Pussy said, cowering on the settee: "What are you talking about? What should I be afraid of?"

"Of everything! Be afraid of the people. They won't forgive you! Be afraid of the water if you tried to drown yourself, the water would throw you out! Be afraid of the earth if you wanted to hide your head in it, it would not admit you! My Vassya is better off lying there in the gully. Levanyuk is better off hanging there on the gallows, Olena was better off running naked in the snow under the German bayonets, all of them are better off than you will be. The day will come when you will envy them! You will weep tears of blood because you are not in their place! You will be sorry a hundred times over that it was not you they strangled on the gallows, not you they stabbed with bayonets, not you they shot dead!"

Her voice broke with rage and hate, and the fierce joy of knowing that the men of the Red Army were already on the move, that they were coming, that this very moment, while she was shouting all this straight into the blenching face of the traitress, they might already be advancing along the road.

"Get out of here," Pussy whispered. "Go at once!"

Fedosya laughed again.

"Why not? Can't say I enjoy looking at your snout. You will remember some day that you told me to get out of my own house!"

She walked out of the room, slamming the door so hard that flakes of chalk rained from the whitewashed walls.

"Go and complain to your fellow that I shouted at you!" she muttered to herself, feeding the fire with chips. "He won't be thinking of you very much longer. He'll soon have something else to think about, perhaps this very day!"

But Kurt wasn't thinking of Pussy at all. He walked into his office in a rage. The soldiers, seeing his compressed lips and frowning face, sprang to attention even more smartly than usual. The sergeant jumped up from his seat at the table.

"Did they ring through from headquarters?"

"Yes, sir."

"Why didn't you let me know?"

"I was ordered not to, sir."

"What do you mean, 'ordered not to'?"

"I was told that it would not be necessary."

"Then why did they ring?"

"They wished to know whether the arrested woman had made a statement yet, sir."

"What did you say?"

"I reported, sir, that she had not made any statement."

"And what else?" the captain hissed.

The sergeant went pale.

"Yes, sir . . . and also . . . I also reported . . ."

"Well, what else did you report?"

"I also . . . reported the execution of the arrested woman. . . ."

"Who gave you permission to report that? Who gave you permission to inform anyone? Who told you to do that? Did I?"

Bending forward he slowly walked towards the man standing at attention before him. The sergeant dared not step back.

"Did I give you orders to that effect? Did I tell you to report that?"

"No, sir!"

Captain Werner raised his hand and hit the sergeant in the face with all his strength.

The sergeant staggered, but still stood at attention and looked straight into Werner's eyes.

"Who told you, who *permitted* you to report this?" Werner asked hoarsely, raising his hand for another blow.

Red blotches appeared on the sergeant's face. The trace of Werner's fingers, white at first, were now rapidly becoming suffused with blood and stood out in angry crimson.

"Where is the headman? Has he been here to-day?"

The sergeant stared unwinkingly into the eyes of Captain Werner.

"Not yet, sir."

"How much grain has been delivered?"

"None at all, sir. Up to now no one has been here."

Werner swore.

"And what about the boy who was shot?"

"No one has come, sir."

The captain furiously pushed a chair away, and threw a sheet of blotting paper from the table to the floor. The sergeant quickly bent down, picked it up and put it back on the table.

"Send for the headman. This minute!"

"Yes, sir "

The sergeant clicked his heels and went outside. Werner opened the drawers and threw the papers on the table. He was in a towering rage. That cursed woman had not said a word and would not have said anything if the interrogation had lasted a year. She would have died a hundred deaths and still said nothing. But there at headquarters they would say that he had been in too much of a hurry, that he had acted irresponsibly and had let slip through his fingers the last chance of picking up a trail that might lead to the mysterious guerilla detachment, elusive as the wind, which was operating in the neighbouring area. And now this idiot of a sergeant could think of nothing better than to report that the woman was dead. Of course, it was quite obvious they never even called him to the telephone, but simply talked to his subordinates behind his back. Of course, they were putting a spoke in his wheel at headquarters and carrying on intrigues against him behind his back. And on top of it all, there was still no delivery of grain. Nearly twenty-four hours had gone by and no one had come yet, no one had given any information as to where the grain was hidden. That idiot of a headman had assured him that they would be frightened! Frightened? Not much! Easy for the fellows at headquarters to talk about his having the headman to help him, but this particular headman had turned out to be totally useless—he could get nothing done, could achieve nothing, and had not the slightest influence on the villagers.

The sergeant was clicking his heels inside the door.

"Well?"

"I beg to report, sir, that the headman has gone "

"What do you mean, gone? I said send for him!"

"I have to report that I went to fetch him myself, but he had gone "

Captain Werner shrugged his shoulders.

"Where did he go?"

"I beg to report, sir, nobody knows "

Werner boiled over.

"What's that? Are you crazy? Shall I have to go and find him for you, or what?"

"I have to report, sir, that we have looked everywhere. Last night the headman was here until late, we checked up together on the estimated quantity of grain reserves in the village. About midnight he left here to go home. He never got there and hasn't been seen by anyone since "

"Have you made inquiries?"

"Yes, sir."

"Could he have cleared out?"

"Probably, sir!"

"Here's a nice mess!" Werner said gloomily, staring at the telephone. "What next?"

"I beg to report, sir, I don't know."

"Idiot," roared the captain. "What good was the fellow to us anyway? Did he help us? What did he do? What did he fix up for us? What?"

"Certainly, sir."

"Well, sit down and write a report to headquarters that the headman has run away, let them send another one, perhaps they might find one with a bit more gumption."

The sergeant left the room and took a sheet of paper. On it he wrote a report on the flight of the headman and a denunciation of the captain who wanted to conceal from headquarters the execution of the prisoner Olena Kostyuk.

"Sause!"

The sergeant jumped up and with a gesture betraying long habit he deftly slipped the unfinished denunciation into the drawer of his desk.

"Who was on patrol in the village during the night? Question them all."

"I have already questioned them, sir, but none of them saw anything."

"A fine state of affairs, I must say. Apparently it's possible to wander around in the village and even to leave it without our sentries seeing anything. At this rate we may one fine day be slaughtered in our sleep, sentries and all, like so many sheep! How was it they saw nothing? After all, Gaplik didn't fly away through the air, he must have walked. What have they been doing? Sleeping?"

"It is impossible to sleep in this cold, sir. And the storm makes such a noise that a man well acquainted with the locality can easily slip through. There ought to be sentries posted all round the village, sir."

"I didn't ask for your opinion about what ought to be and what ought not to be done! Where are the men you're going to post as sentries? Have you got sufficient men for that? By the way, what were you doing yourself? Didn't you know that the headman required special protection?"

The sergeant remembered that Gaplik had asked to be escorted home and had obviously been afraid of going out alone. He would therefore obviously have been too scared to run away

alone at night But the sergeant preferred not to mention this to the captain. He did not want to irritate him even more The sergeant had a guilty conscience—he thought he ought after all to have seen that fool of a Gaphk home

"Bunch of idiots! Nice outfit to fight a war with," grumbled the captain

The sergeant, at attention, was waiting near the door

"Well, what are you waiting for? Go, write your report, give them a treat, write, write! A fine assistant they've picked for me, I must say "

The sergeant went outside and quickly completed his denunciation, adding the angry words spoken by Werner in his fury While he wrote, the sergeant every now and then felt his crimson, aching cheek with his hand

Werner bent over his papers but soon realized that he was incapable of doing any work in his present state of mind

"Stay by the telephone, I am going out for a walk "

"I beg to report, sir, that it is terribly cold outside "

"I know that without your telling me I came here, didn't I?" barked the captain, and turned up his collar

The wind had abated but the cold was worse than ever The snow crunched under foot Although the sky was overcast, the snow still hurt the eyes with its blinding glare Werner stopped on the threshold of the Kommandantur and stared at the village with his heart full of hate The village lay quiet, seemingly peaceful under the tall caps of snow covering its roofs There was no sign of life except for a few German soldiers busying themselves here and there Not even a dog barked All the dogs had been shot by soldiers the first day They had attacked the strangers who broke into the houses 'Just as savage as their masters,' Werner had thought at the time

The sleeping village, for all its apparent calm, held a threat of secret hostility for the captain No, it would be better to be at the front and fight the enemy man to man, he thought They called this a 'rest period'—to sit here and establish order in an occupied village Easier said than done. It was a month since they had driven out the Bolsheviks, but up to now every one of his plans and moves had been frustrated by the inflexible, stubborn, silent resistance of the villagers What were these dull-witted people up to? They did not seem to understand that they would have to give way in the end, that they could achieve nothing even if they all perished to the last man, and that whatever they did things would go on precisely the same according to plans worked out in Germany well in advance They just

refused to accept this plain fact. They were evidently still convinced that the Bolsheviks would win.

The drone of an engine was heard from afar. Werner turned down his collar from his ears to listen. It was an aeroplane. The purring of the engine sounded thin in the clear air, like the whine of a mosquito. But the sound grew louder and stronger. Werner scanned the sky, shielding his eyes with his hand.

"There it is, sir," the sentry at the door of the Kommandantur ventured to say.

Werner turned in the direction indicated by the sentry. Yes, there it was, first the size of a gnat, then of a fly, growing larger every second.

"Ours?" asked the captain in a tone that was half a question, half an assertion.

The sentry listened.

"No, must be theirs, sir. By the sound of the engine."

Werner was worried. It was a whole month since the last enemy aeroplane had been seen in this district. Were they getting nearer again?

A group of soldiers came out of the house.

"Bolshevik 'plane," said one of them.

The street was no longer empty. It was suddenly full of people. Women were standing in front of the cottages, children were tumbling out of the houses in swarms. All were looking upwards, hands shielding eyes.

Malyuchikha gripped her boy Sasha by the shoulder.

"Is it ours?"

But no one had any doubts on the matter. The 'plane was hedge-hopping. And in the bright glare of the snowy day they all saw the unmistakable markings—the red star—on its wings.

Malyuchikha went down on her knees. Following her, all the women sank to their knees together. The children, forgetting everything else, rushed out into the middle of the road, turned their faces upward, waved their hands.

"Ours! It's ours!" they piped joyfully. Tears ran down the grave faces of the women. A 'plane was flying over the village, a Soviet 'plane. On its wings, marked with the Red Star, the badge of freedom, it brought tidings and fraternal greetings from the east. The first Soviet 'plane for a month. The first 'plane the voice of which was not the sinister drone of death, the staccato muffled roar of the German engines, the first 'plane which did not show on its wings the crooked black serpent of the swastika.

Captain Werner heard the cries of the children. He looked at the street and saw a sight he had not seen during his whole

stay in the village The street was crowded with people The women were kneeling in front of their cottages In the roadway flocks of children were hopping about like sparrows, and shouting Old men were stretching shaking hands towards the steel bird up in the sky Werner trembled with rage

"Drive this mob away!" he shouted at his men They did not understand Werner drew his revolver and fired into the crowd of children A shot cracked, then a second But the captain had missed His hand was unsteady with rage The children scattered like a flock of sparrows The women rushed after their children In an instant the whole crowd scattered as if the wind had blown them away The people vanished, behind hurriedly slammed doors In front of Werner's eyes the village reverted to its empty silence

"Here you, you oafs, didn't you hear what I said?" Werner turned to the soldiers who stood petrified He was furious that they had all seen him shoot and miss—miss at such close range too "You idiots stand here and calmly watch a hostile demonstration And where are the anti-aircraft guns? What are they doing?"

Just at that moment one of the anti-aircraft guns fired The shell-burst, a little dark cloud, appeared far behind the 'plane The next shot was even further away The 'plane rose a little higher and disappeared in the distance

"What have you been waiting for—to put salt on his tail, or what? Are you asleep on that battery?" Werner roared at the bombardier running up to him

"We thought it was one of ours, sir and afterwards "

"All the women in the village knew whose it was, only you had to think this, and that and the other! Wait until I "

"Sorry, sir, but it was the first 'plane " the bombardier tried to justify the gun-crew

"Hold your tongue! No one asked you! First 'plane indeed If he had chucked a bomb on your battery you'd have had your 'first 'plane, sir ' Idiots!"

Captain Werner turned away and returned to the Kommandantur in a towering rage He was trembling all over with fury This damned unlucky day These damned villagers

"Well, has the headman turned up?" he roared

The sergeant, frightened out of his wits jumped up from his chair

"No, sir, captain, sir we had no orders to continue the search, sir "

Werner snorted angrily and sat down Of course, these

damned idiots, none of them thought of anything . . . and the responsibility for everything would be his, Werner's, alone. His good friends at headquarters would see to that.

It suddenly occurred to him that if there was any trouble, further unpleasantness might arise because of his relations with Pussy. It would be regarded as further proof of his undesirably lenient attitude towards the native population.

"I shall have to get rid of her," he concluded unwillingly.

He did not want to do anything. Why did they bother him, a fighting officer, with all these affairs of commissariat? Why make him a sort of policeman in this damned hole? What could he do here? Piles of papers, papers and more papers. No getting away from them. Both Gaplik and the sergeant had rummaged day and night in the books of the collective farm, but nothing had come of that either. The Army was demanding grain, meat, fats. But as long ago as last autumn the cunning Bolsheviks had driven away the herds of the collective farm and now the few miserable cows left in the cowsheds of the cottages were hardly sufficient to feed his own unit. As for the grain, it had either been taken out of the district or was so well hidden that there was no way of getting at it.

"Well, what about the hostages?"

"They are sitting in the detention-room, sir."

"Did they get anything to eat?"

"N-no, sir . . . nothing, sir."

"To drink?"

"Nothing, sir," the soldier said in a low voice.

"Good, very good. Not a crumb of bread, not a drop of water! They don't want to give *us* any food, so we won't give *them* any food, ha-ha! If they want to die, let them die. The loss will be small. . . ."

Werner was restless and went out again. He thought of going home but remembered that Pussy was there and changed his mind. Instead he turned towards the gun-position. Guns were a passion with him, although he was not an artilleryman. Now he decided to let off steam by giving the gun-crew the edge of his tongue.

A few minutes later his raucous voice could be heard across the green, shouting orders to the soldiers and swearing at them.

"He's in a temper," one of the soldiers remarked in the Kommandantur.

"He's got reason enough . . ." said another. "He can't get any grain deliveries and now the headman has run away on top of it. . . ."

"Smart fellow

The sergeant glanced suspiciously at the soldier who had spoken last

"What's that? Are you by any chance envying the headman?"

"Nothing to envy him for, sergeant," the soldier replied, looking into the eyes of the sergeant with an assumption of innocence "He won't go far: our men will be sure to catch him."

"If he made for the rear" added another soldier

"And if he went in the other direction, the Bolsheviks will settle his hash. No, not much to envy him for"

"Perhaps the muzhiks simply did him in on the quiet"

The sergeant was startled

"Nonsense! How could the muzhiks do him in? He was here until late at night and never arrived home at all"

"Perhaps he was waylaid"

"Rot! No one is about after dark There's a curfew!" the sergeant shouted angrily

The soldier looked askance at him, but said nothing After all, the sergeant could not possibly have forgotten that within the last twenty-four hours, despite the curfew and despite the sentries and patrols, a boy had crept up to the barn and that the body of this boy had disappeared mysteriously, although dead bodies do not usually wander about much on their own

"And anyway, what's all this talk about? Go and do your job!" The sergeant was evidently nervous

The soldiers said nothing The sergeant was no less free with his fists than the captain And as he had obviously stopped one that day—the purple marks of fingers were still visible on his face—he might at any moment vent his bad temper on his subordinates

"Where's Neumann?"

"He's gone to look for meat"

The sergeant shrugged his shoulders

"Look for meat . . . What, don't they know where the cows are?"

"There is hardly a cow to be found anywhere, sergeant; the captain sent ten to headquarters day before yesterday They've gone to look for poultry"

The sergeant shrugged his shoulders once again and pretended to be absorbed in a paper while waiting for a 'phone call from headquarters He was bursting with malice Easy to hit a man who could not hit back, he thought, but not so easy to find the gram headquarters were asking for Nor was it so easy to find out where the guerillas were hiding. The sergeant knew that

the captain was in for serious trouble. And although he knew perfectly well that no one else could have achieved any better results here, he was glad that Werner was about to break his neck over this impossible job. Herr Werner had been carrying his nose too high, thinking too little of his duties and too much about that rat-like hussy of his. Now Captain Werner would have to pay for everything.

The sergeant had a fervent hatred for the captain ever since the day they had entered the market town and together broken into a house from which shots had been fired at the Germans during the retreat of the Reds. They hadn't found anyone in the house but the sergeant discovered a beautiful grey fur coat in a wardrobe. It was just the day before mail day, when parcels could be dispatched home and his Mizzi had always pined for a fur coat. But the captain had grabbed the fur coat and given it to that she-monkey of his. And now the unit was stuck away in this village, where no one wore anything but stinking sheepskins. Mizzi was shivering in her thin little coat and the captain's hussy swaggered about in furs. The sergeant could never think of this without getting into a rage, and he was always thinking up various things he could report about the captain to headquarters. Werner was not popular at headquarters because he was so stuck up, thought himself a cut above all the others. Anyway, what had he got that Sergeant Sause hadn't? After all, the Fuehrer himself had only been a sergeant. The rays of the Fuehrer's glory were reflected on Sergeant Sause and he could never forget the incident of the fur coat nor the cuff on the ear, which had not been the first by any means.

The captain's shouts could be heard all over the village and Sause smiled maliciously. 'Go on, yell your head off, a fat lot of good it'll do you!'

The soldiers were making a lot of noise in the village as they went from house to house in a bunch. They would have been most indignant if anyone had called them cowards. Yet even in broad daylight they did not feel safe in 'this cursed village,' as they called it, and preferred to go about in droves.

Grokhachikha opened her door when they knocked and grimly but boldly looked the entering soldier in the face. The girls hid away in the corner.

"What do you want?"

"Hen, hen, give!"

"Haven't got any, you've eaten them all."

Although they did not understand her actual words they understood her meaning well enough. Not believing her they

searched the yard, looked into the hencoop, then into the empty cowshed and pigsty, and stirred up the straw in the empty shed, as if they thought the hens might be hiding there. Grokhachikha shrugged her shoulders as she watched them.

"Nothing here," said the soldier who had stirred up the straw.

They went on searching from house to house, from coop to coop.

"Hen, hen, give!"

The only chicken which Banyuchikha had succeeded in concealing from the eyes of the foragers most unfortunately cackled out of turn. The Germans yanked it out triumphantly from under the stove, but it got away and in its terror jumped on to the window-ledge, beating its wings against the glass.

"Get round! Get at it from the other side!"

The pullet uttered a loud squawk, found the way out and fluttered into the yard. The soldiers rushed out in pursuit of the bird, which sped on with wings spread, ploughing up the snow as it ran. One of the soldiers drew a revolver and fired. The fowl dropped dead, a bleeding heap of feathers on the snow. The soldier seized it by the legs and swung it victoriously in the air.

The others continued their round from house to house. "Chicken, chicken, give!" aggressive, arrogant German voices were heard repeating again and again.

The villagers saw them coming, and those who had time to do so quickly hid the fowls in the stoves, under the beds or in the hay-lofts. The Germans searched, sniffed like hungry dogs and followed the scent, but the results were meagre enough. Finally they decided, although they had received no orders to that effect, that they would requisition one of the few cows remaining in the village. Lokutikha, the owner of the cow, shed tears and wrung her hands. The soldiers pushed her away so roughly that she nearly fell to the ground.

"Pestrushka! Pestrushka!"

The cow looked at her with its gentle eyes that were moist and brown like a freshly peeled conker. The Germans dragged the cow along by a rope, but it resisted. Refusing to step over the high threshold, it fell to its knees. One of the soldiers pulled it by the tail and it moored pitifully.

"She is with calf, she is with calf, don't hurt her!" Lokutikha cried. "Look what they are doing! The cow is with calf, good people!"

"Stop making that row, Mother!" Savka, her ten-year-old eldest son, said sternly, looking at the Germans with a frown.

"But what will I give you to eat, my own, how will I feed you? We have nothing left, just this one cow and now they are taking it away! My children will die, they will starve to death!"

"Stop that row, Mother!" Savka insisted, even more sternly

Finally they got the cow over the threshold. The soldiers pushed it, pulled it, showered blows on it. Lokutikha ran beside it—she wanted at least to stroke the bulging flank of her beloved cow for the last time

"Pestrushka! Pestrushka!"

The cow looked at its mistress with its large limpid eyes and lowed mournfully

"My darling! Only a beast and yet she knows Pestrushka!"

Lokutikha ran, stumbling over her long skirts, she was weeping and her face was scarlet with emotion and exertion. She had forgotten all about the Germans and the world around her, until finally one of the soldiers pushed her so hard that she fell and lay groaning in the snow. Savka walked up to her with long manly strides

"I told you not to make that row, Mother. What good did it do you? Get up, this is no way to behave. And it's cold, too."

Lokutikha buried her face in the snow and sobbed. Savka tried to lift her up with his feeble childish hands

"What will become of us now? What are we to do?"

"Stop it!" Savka was angry. "Look how many cows they've taken already, but no one else made such a song and dance about it."

"But there are five of you in the house!" Lokutikha tried to justify herself

"Others have eight and more!"

"Don't you dare preach to me, you egg! Is that the way to talk to your mother?"

"Go in, you had better go in, Nyurka is yelling her head off!"

"What, Nyurka is crying, you say?" She hurried back to the cottage, the frozen edge of her skirts rustling as she ran

The crowd of soldiers and the cow disappeared behind the Kommandantur building. The Germans turned the barn into a slaughter-house, and a few minutes later the smoking carcass of Pestrushka, less the hide, was swinging from a cross-beam

Meanwhile Werner had grown tired of shouting at the gun-crew and returned to his office

"I beg to report, sir, a cow has been requisitioned!" Sergeant Sause reported

Werner flapped his hand. These commissariat affairs bored

him stiff To-day a cow, to-morrow a cow—but what about next week? The army command had issued strict orders that units were to forage for themselves in the villages in which they were posted Hardly a month had gone by and the village was completely cleaned out All geese, chickens, ducks, pigs were eaten Only a few wretched cows were left And when those were gone?

"Well, has any food been sent?"

"Only wine and chocolate, sir "

"What? Nothing else?"

"Nothing else, sir Day before yesterday we were again reminded of the order that every unit was to provide for itself from local resources Shall I send the wine and chocolate home for you, sir?"

"Yes, send it, but see to it that it doesn't vanish on the way "

"No, sir, it's all in a sealed box "

Werner buttoned up his overcoat and slowly rolled himself a cigarette, turning something over in his mind

"Oh, yes, Sause, one more thing. ."

"Yes, sir?"

"Foraging is being conducted in a chaotic manner. From to-day, you will be responsible for food supplies "

"Yes, sir," the sergeant answered, his face contorted with fury Werner was already in the doorway

"Captain Werner, sir!"

"Well, what is it?"

"May I ask permission to requisition in neighbouring villages?"

Werner shrugged his shoulders

"Don't talk nonsense Other villages are the territory of other units You know that as well as I do "

"There are no food supplies left in this village, sir "

"It's easy to say that You'll have to search for it, understand? Search, I tell you! If you search properly, you'll find what is wanted!"

And Werner went out, slamming the door.

VIII

PUSSY LEFT THE HOUSE AND HESITATED WHICH WAY TO TURN She knew that this errand was utterly useless, but Kurt had insisted, insisted with increasing harshness and acerbity

"It's your sister, after all You don't mean to say you can't talk to your own sister? You simply don't want to! All right,

the time will come when it'll be my turn not to want to oblige . . .

Pussy was frightened. She was utterly dependent on Kurt. What if he suddenly took it into his head to get rid of her, here in this village where everyone regarded her as an enemy?

Tucking her hands into the sleeves of her fur coat she walked slowly along the street. The impending interview was quite hopeless. Of course she could not tell Kurt that she had already had a talk with her sister—if you could call it a talk—it was a stormy scene which had taken place between them soon after Pussy's arrival in the village. Olga simply spat in her face, and the only thing Pussy found out from her were the few words that Olga in her rage had let fall about Vassya lying dead in the gully. Olga had meant it as an insult, as a reproach for her consenting to live in the house of a woman whose son had been killed in action. At the time Pussy could not understand what that had to do with her, but Olga thought it had, a lot. Olga shouted at Pussy for a bit and then flung out: That was all. How could Pussy go to her now and have a talk with her?

Pussy sighed and thought of Seryosha. No, Seryosha had never shouted at her, had never even been angry with her, only sighed sometimes and looked thoughtful. But it was no use thinking of Seryosha—it was Kurt now who was her man.

She worked herself into a rage. How dare he? She knew only too well that he could dare much more and that there was nothing she could do about it. But Pussy could not understand it. She had behaved just the same to Kurt as to Seryosha, therefore she wasn't to blame for this unpleasantness. It was simply that Kurt and she were quite different and unlike each other.

The house where Olga lived was quite close, only a few steps away. What was Pussy to do? Knock and go in? No, that was impossible. Pussy stood still for an instant, trying to make up her mind, but despite her warm shoes the frost pinched her toes painfully and she turned back. Kurt could do as he pleased, shout at her and fly into a rage—she would never again expose herself to Olga's contempt. If it might conceivably lead to something, Pussy would have gladly obliged, but in fact nothing, absolutely nothing could come of such an interview. Pussy walked along a bit and then paused again. What on earth was she to do? It would be much better if they killed Olga as they had killed Olena, that would be the end of all this trouble and unpleasantness.

Pussy glanced at the cottage in which her sister lived and her

heart contracted unpleasantly. Someone was coming out. She stamped her feet in the snow, feeling as if she had been caught red-handed at she did not know what, and looked askance from under her eyelashes to see who it was. It was not Olga but the woman she lodged with. The woman stood in the doorway, shaded her eyes with her hand and looked intently into the distance. Then she half closed the door and said something loudly. Instantly a group of people formed around her, they all shaded their eyes and looked in the same direction.

Fedosya Kravchuk was there too, looking in the same direction as all the others. Her heart missed a beat and then began to race wildly, hammering in her breast like the clapper of a bell. Men were slowly advancing along the road towards the village. They marched along in close formation, their bayonets glistening in the sun.

"Germans coming?" people asked.

"As if there weren't enough of them here already."

"Perhaps they hope to find something to eat here."

"They're not Germans," Banyuchikha suddenly said in a tense voice that broke with emotion in the middle of the sentence. "Look, look, good people, they aren't Germans!"

"Are you crazy, who else could it be?"

"Ours, God be praised, our men are coming. . ."

"Look again, woman, how could our men come like this? In broad daylight, in the middle of the road?"

"Mummy, they have stars on their caps, look!" Grisha Banyuk shouted in his thin childish voice.

"What's that you're saying? Can you see, can you really see that?"

The brightness of the snow dazzled them and it was difficult to distinguish much. They all strained their eyes desperately in the attempt to discern who the newcomers were.

"Germans? Ours?"

"Ours, nonsense! Grisha is seeing things. . . Look, the Germans are standing quietly at their posts, they're not shooting."

"Grisha is right," Alexander suddenly declared, "the caps are ours."

"Ours?"

"Yes, but it's no occasion for rejoicing; look again, you can see them now."

All fell silent. Yes, now they could see. A group of Red Army men were coming up the road. Or rather staggering along the road, with an armed German escort alongside.

"They're ours, but prisoners," the people whispered in despair.

More and more people appeared in the street. The crowd watched the approaching group with wide-open terrified eyes. Already they could see that the Red Army men were walking with difficulty, that it cost them a painful effort. Their German escort urged them on with rough shouts.

"God have mercy on us, there are wounded among them."

"The Germans have taken away their felt boots; they are barefoot, look!"

"Look, Sonia, their feet are bleeding!"

A German soldier snarled savagely at the people clustering in front of the cottage. But no one paid any attention to him, their eyes were fixed on the approaching procession.

"Merciful God!"

The procession reached the village. It was now possible to distinguish the pale, tormented faces of the prisoners. A Red Army man in the second rank staggered as if drunk.

"Hi, you there!" the escorting soldier shouted. The wounded man straightened up and tried to walk like the rest, but staggered again. One of his comrades cautiously held him up, but the German saw it and struck away the supporting arm with the butt of his rifle. The arm dropped and hung down along the prisoner's body like a broken twig.

"Merciful God!"

The Red Army men dragged themselves along with difficulty. Their naked feet were covered with wounds and left bloody tracks on the snow. They fell frequently and laboriously struggled to their feet again under repeated blows from rifle-butts.

Pussy stood and watched like everyone else. She saw the pale, drawn, tortured faces, the eyes burning with fever. She saw the clotted brown blood on the improvised bandages, the blackened, frost-bitten feet, and she smiled her habitual insipid smile.

"Stop grinning!" a voice hissed in her ear. It was Olga. Tight-lipped, with clenched fists, brows meeting in the middle of her forehead in a deep crease, she stood and watched the prisoners as they passed. And suddenly, through the red mist that veiled her eyes she saw the narrow, pale face of her sister Pussy, the glitter of an earring over a fur collar and painted lips curved in an inane smile.

"Stop grinning!"

Pussy stepped back. Olga's eyes, wide open and angry, her lips tense with anger, were almost on her.

"I didn't grin." Involuntarily she tried to defend herself.

"Yes, you did," Olga said, and struck with all her force at that mane smile, at that pale face, at the face of the German officer's hussy Pussy squealed like a puppy, shuddered, and ran for it, stumbling over the long skirts of her fur coat and clutching her head with her hands.

The prisoners were still approaching. Now they had reached the crowd of villagers. Their feverish, burning eyes gazed at the women standing in the street.

"Bread," one of them said. A German hit him over the head with the butt of his rifle. But another prisoner took it up.

"Bread. We have had nothing for a week."

"God have mercy on us," groaned Banyuchikha.

All the women rushed into their houses. With trembling hands they unearthed from secret hiding-places every scrap of food they could scrape together.

"Quick, quick, give it to them. hurry up!"

The first to return was Banyuchikha. Ignoring the guard, she rushed to the prisoners with a dark crust, the remnant of her last loaf she had saved for the children.

"Keep away!" shouted the German, but she was deaf and blind. She pushed past the guard and tried to put the bread into the hand of the wounded Red Army man.

"Keep away!" the German shouted again and hit her a swinging body-blow with the butt of his rifle.

Banyuchikha sank down on the snow without a sound. The German kicked the piece of bread out of reach. It rolled away towards the roadside ditch. One of the prisoners ran after it. A shot rang out. The prisoner fell.

The women never even glanced at Banyuchikha, who was lying unconscious where she had fallen. They were running after the prisoners, trying to give them pieces of bread and flat cakes baked in ashes.

A squad of German soldiers came running out of the Kommandantur. "Get back!" their sergeant yelled savagely. The soldiers tried to drive the women away with the butts of their rifles. The women, protecting their heads with their arms, fell on their knees and tried to throw the bread under the feet of the prisoners. One of the men bent down to pick up a piece. A German soldier fired and the prisoner fell at the feet of his comrades.

"It's no use, citizens, don't risk your lives for nothing, it's no use!" a wounded Red Army man cried in a loud high voice which carried to the end of the road. He was young but could hardly drag himself along. "Go away, women, go away, mothers. They

won't let us take even a mouthful anyway, so why perish all for nothing?"

The women had already realized, even without this intervention, that there was nothing to be done. Two men lay dead in the road. Banyuchikha was laboriously getting on to her feet—other women were standing with pieces of bread in their hands looking sadly at the Red Army men, who looked at the bread

"Sasha!"

Malyuchikha called her son. "There's nothing we can do here. Get the kids together and run down by the backs to the turning in the road, throw down the bread on the road and run away. Perhaps the Germans won't notice it and our lads might pick up a mouthful or so."

The children vanished from the street as if the wind had blown them away. The women withdrew to the doors of their cottages and stood there weeping, biting the ends of their headcloths and shaking their heads in inarticulate grief.

"Are you all right?" Frossya Grokhach asked Banyuchikha tenderly. She had brought her a glass of water and was rubbing her temples with snow.

Banyuchikha sat down and covered her face with her hands.

"What is it? Are you in pain?"

"No, no, it's nothing, Frossya."

"Don't cry, it'll pass off if you lie down a bit."

"You silly girl, do you think I was worrying about myself? I just felt a little sick, but I'll be all right. Listen, Frossya, I was thinking . . . if my Peter . . . if it happened to Peter . . . better he should perish in the first battle, better a bomb tore him to pieces or a tank crushed him . . . rather than this, do you hear?"

She whispered the words in Frossya's ear in a voice hoarse with passion. Frossya squeezed her hand.

"Calm yourself, calm yourself."

"D'you hear? If there is no help for it, let him put a bullet in his brain, blow himself up with a grenade, only not this, not this!"

"Of course . . . but you had better go in, you'll freeze here. I'll help you."

Banyuchikha stood up with difficulty and, leaning heavily on Frossya's shoulder, slowly walked back to her house. Grisha watched his mother with great frightened eyes. She threw herself on the bed with a groan. She was in great pain and felt she was going to be sick. But her mind was on something else.

"Grisha, come here!"

The boy went up to the bed

"Grisha, listen to what I'm saying " She paused

"I'm listening, but you don't say anything "

"Listen, Grisha, if at any time—may God forbid—you have to choose between dying and being taken by the Germans—choose death "

"Are you off your head?" Frossya asked indignantly "The boy is only five years old "

Grisha was frightened and began to cry

"Why frighten the kid? He doesn't understand all this yet and by the time he's grown up there won't be any Germans ."

Banyuchikha reflected

"You may be right There would be no justice in this world if the whole tribe of hell-hounds didn't perish to the last man "

She groaned and put her hand on her belly

"Oh! Frossya, I think I'm going to be sick . "

"That's all right, you'll feel better after it—and I'll go and bring you some fresh water "

She fussed about, soaking cloths in cold water and wringing them out, while Banyuchikha watched her and groaned quietly Suddenly she noticed that Grisha was crying

"Here, what are you crying about? Look how touchy the boy is just like his father "

"Leave him alone He's only a baby and you frightened him Of course he cries why make such a cackle about it . and what's wrong with his father?"

"Nothing Nothing Only I am just wondering whether he would have the sense to do away with himself if . "

"Trust him to look after himself "

"But I'm afraid You know, he is so undecided, always needs advice what to do and how . Who will be giving him advice now, poor lad? . "

"Now he is in the Army he'll get his orders, not advice," Frossya said, and put a wet cloth on Banyuchikha's belly, where the German rifle-butt had left a large black bruise

"True, he'll have his orders now," Banyuchikha said

"Come here, Grisha, I'll wash you, look how dirty you are And you needn't cry Look at your mummy, she's in bed, the German hit her with his rifle, but she doesn't cry "

The little boy stood staring at his mother with big round eyes With one finger of his left hand he was picking his nose

"Hey, son, you had better take your finger out of your nose," Banyuchikha pretended to be angry. "His father is a Red Army

man and he picks his nose!" She groaned again. "Oh, Frossya, not one of them got so much as a crumb of bread. They will all die, poor lads, every one of them. . . . Just think, in their own country, and none of us could help them, none of us could so much as give them a crumb of bread, nothing, not a mouthful to eat, nor a sip to drink . . . to think that they must perish like this in their own country. . . . And where are they taking them?"

"They say there's a camp in Rudy. Probably there."

"How could they go all the way to Rudy? They could hardly stand and how many *verst* is it to Rudy? No, they'll never make it and anyway the Germans will kill them on the way, like they did those two lads. . . ."

"The children are going up by the backs to throw down bread on the road. When the prisoners come, they may pick up a little. Perhaps the Germans won't notice. . . ."

"If only the children do it properly . . . in the middle of the road. Our lads are in front, the escort behind, they might not see. . . ."

"Leave it to the children, they know what to do," Frossya reassured her. "You know our children—they're as sharp as needles."

Banyuchikha silently nodded her head. She suddenly felt very sleepy, unpleasantly weak and very sick. But more than anything else she was tormented by the memory of the feverish, sunken eyes of the young Red Army man, of his rapid, avid snatch at the bread, which he never got after all.

"Oh!"

"What is it? Pain?" Frossya asked.

"No, I'd like to go to sleep."

"Why not? Have a good nap, it will pass off then," Frossya said.

Banyuchikha closed her eyes. But she still saw the pale young face stamped with the seal of death, the lock of hair curling out from under the cap and the crazed eyes staring at the piece of black bread. She knew that she would never, to the end of her days, forget those prisoners staggering and falling in the snow and one young Red Army man who was starving and to whom she had not been able to give one piece of bread.

.

The children were struggling along the backs through the deep snow with their load of bread. Near the houses and barns the going was easier, but once they reached the open fields, the

snow proved to be unexpectedly deep. Osska Chechor immediately sank in up to the shoulders

"Sasha! Sasha!"

"Shut up! The Germans will hear you. You are too small, go back home."

"I can't get out . . .!"

"You'll manage. No time. Hurry up, boys!"

The ground here was uneven, full of ups and downs, mounds and hollows. But it was all covered with an even coat of snow. The hollows were traps. Ground apparently smooth and solid suddenly gave way under the children's feet. The top layer of snow froze into a hard crust and it was possible to walk over it for a time, until it suddenly broke with a grinding crackling sound and the boys disappeared in the soft snow underneath. They could not use their hands because their hands were full of bread, potatoes, and oatcakes. The snow was sharp as broken glass and it cut like glass. The boys gave up one after the other, only Sasha and Savka Lokut kept stubbornly on. In order to reach the spot where the road swung round in a great arc, they had to circle the village and cross the wide plain below.

"Faster! Faster!" Sasha panted. He was out of breath. Streams of sweat ran down his neck and crept down his back. Sweat ran into his eyes, he had a stitch in his side, and felt sick. His feet were slipping as if he were walking on a slimy river-bottom. He fell more than once and scrambled to his feet again. Sharp snow cut his hands. Blood seeped from them, leaving pink stains on the snow. Fortunately he had found time to snatch up a linen bag in which he used to carry his books to school in the old days before the Germans came. It came in useful now. The bread was safe in the bag and his hands were free, he could use them to climb out of the snowdrifts. Savka was running after him, his tongue hanging out of his mouth. It was easier to follow the trodden track, otherwise Savka could not have kept up, he was smaller and weaker than Sasha.

The snowy plain seemed endless. And yet in summer the cattle grazed in this field and it was not so very wide, one could run quickly from one end to the other over the soft short grass. The boys remembered the pasture well, they had played here ever since they could walk. But now it was strange and unfamiliar. All the landmarks were gone. Gone were the ditches over which they had jumped so often, the mounds they had climbed barefoot hundreds of times. They tried in vain to keep to the flats—snow was everywhere and the snow did not give its secrets away. The children struggled forward, fell, sank into the

snow up to their armpits and struggled on again. The agonizing journey seemed to have no end.

"Faster!" Sasha gasped, spitting out a mouthful of snow.

The haversack hanging from his shoulder was soaked and growing heavier and heavier. His feet were wet, his trousers sopping, and whenever he succeeded for a while in walking on the top of the snow without breaking in, his wet clothes froze on him and the piercing claws of the frost gripped the very marrow of his bones. He saw nothing in front of him, except little red and black rings. The blood hammered in his temples and he felt as if it would soon have to burst out of his veins and squirt on to the snow.

"Faster!" he groaned, and the word drove Savka on like a whip-lash, although Sasha had long since forgotten that he was not alone and had only said it to urge himself on, because he felt that any moment he might fall and never get up again.

Savka was left far behind. But Sasha knew that, come what may, he had to reach the road and leave the contents of his haversack there. This was the last chance of getting food to the prisoners. Should he fail, they would be driven on through Levanevka, burned to the ground, to Rudy concentration camp, the place about which people talked in whispers, where Red Army prisoners were dying in hundreds behind barbed wire without a bit of bread, without a sip to drink. Only he, Sasha, now stood between the captive Red Army men and the Rudy camp. It seemed to him that his oatcakes and bread could avert starvation from them and save them all.

One more small hill and he would be there. Faster, faster, Sasha urged himself, feeling that he was weakening and that his legs could hardly carry him any farther. The stitch in his side was worse than ever, his head sang and in his mouth he felt the unpleasant insipid taste of blood. Faster! Faster! He fell head over heels into a snowdrift and scrambled out clumsily, throwing up his arms like a man drowning. He crawled up the last hill on all fours. This must be the road at last.

Yes, it was the road. And along the road German guards were escorting the Red Army men. It seemed to Sasha like a dream. He did not want to believe it, he could not believe it. But it was the truth. Sasha lay in the snow, on knees and elbows, just as he had been crawling up the slope. The prisoners were passing by. The wounded staggered as if drunk, the Germans yelled, one man fell and was beaten with rifle-butts and driven on with kicks and oaths. Sasha looked and the prisoners went on and on and on. So he had been too late. Too late by some two or three

minutes In front of the prisoners lay the empty white road, and on it only snow and more snow, nothing else The oatcakes were to remain in the haversack, wet and heavy, in a linen haversack, only ten paces away, but the Red Army men would never eat them because Sasha had been two minutes late, because he had not run fast enough, because he got up too slowly when he fell, because he had failed to do, had been incapable of doing what was required He thought of Mishka Yes, Mishka would have done it, Mishka would have arrived in time And now the Germans would drive the prisoners to Rudy, behind the barbed wire, and they would die there in the cold of hunger and thirst, because, he, Sasha

Sasha laid down his head on the snow and began to cry His tears fell fast, his nose began to run, his face was wet. His feet, soaked through, were freezing stiff with the icy cold and the stitch in his side stabbed him with a pain past bearing But he did not want to get up, could not get up They had gone past, gone for ever and he had been two minutes late

It was cold, terribly cold Sasha wept for the Red Army men staggering along the road in this terrible frost He wept for Mishka, buried in the cottage, for his daddy who had gone away with the guerillas, but most of all for himself and for his own failure

He was feeling colder and colder But he didn't care He just wanted to stay where he was, lying there on the snow

"Sasha, get up! Get up!"

He started and burrowed even deeper into the snow.

"Come on, sonny, get up, it's very cold . Don't cry, you did your best!"

Malyuchikha squatted down beside her son and gently stroked his shoulder

"You're sopping wet Come, get up, and we'll go home I'm cold too, my skirt is all wet, got soaked as I came along, it was difficult to get this far . Come, get up then "

She lifted his head and looked into his eyes swollen with weeping

"There's nothing we can do, son. It just didn't work out right," she said sadly

"I was too late, " Sasha whispered, his voice shaken by sobs

"Yes, son, it was no good There was too much wind, too much snow Even I could hardly get as far as this to find you. Come, we must go home " She took his hands and pulled him up. Sasha got up slowly and unwillingly

"It didn't come off this time, but we'll do better next time. When they bring in prisoners again we won't wait or stand about, we'll go into the houses and leave what is required by the roadside. To-day we all crowded together and made a noise and so it all came to nothing. . . . But who could guess beforehand how it would be?"

Sasha walked slowly by her side with his eyes on the ground.

"Savka came running home more dead than alive. I asked him 'where is Sasha?' and he said you were lying in the snow. . . . I left everything and came running here. . . . Don't cry, you can't do more than your best . . . the snow was too deep . . . there hasn't been such a winter for many years. . . ."

She could hardly get along herself, but she tried to make conversation and help the boy along at the same time: "Come, you walk along behind me, it's easier that way. . . ."

They were returning along the track Sasha had first made with Savka; then Savka had gone back along it, then his mother had trodden it down even more and yet it seemed to Sasha as if this were not the same road at all. His mother was saying that the going was difficult, and although the track was already well marked Sasha could hardly drag himself along. Each boot seemed to weigh a hundred pounds. His hands and his head were as heavy as iron. He felt every one of the bones in his feet, in his hands, in his back hurting with a sharp persistent pain.

When they got back to the road he staggered and nearly fell. His mother held him up.

"What's wrong with you, son?"

"N-nothing," he whispered. His head swam and the world was dancing before his eyes.

His mother stooped and took him in her arms.

"No, no, Mother," he started to protest, but as he felt her arm pillowing his head he suddenly fell asleep. Malyuchikha smiled down at the sleeping face of her son.

"What is it, neighbour? Is anything wrong?" asked Terpilikha, who was coming from the opposite direction with a bundle of firewood on her back and an expression of alarm in her eyes swollen and red with weeping.

"No . . . he's only tired, he ran all the way to the road over all these ups and downs. . . ."

"Did he get there in time?"

"No; how could he? Even a grown man might have found it too much for him. . . ."

She was short of breath and slowed down her pace.

"He's too heavy for you, eh?"

"Of course he's heavy He's past his ninth birthday . . ."
she replied, and hugged her sleeping son closer to her breast
"Look, he's fallen asleep as if he were in his own bed Help me,
Gorpina I can't open the door by myself "

Terpilukha came nearer and unlatched the door

"Mummy!" cried Zina with tears in her voice "What's
happened to Sasha?"

"Nothing, nothing, he's just asleep Don't shout like that,
you'll wake him up "

"Asleep?" The children were surprised They gathered
round and watched her put Sasha down on the feather bed,
carefully pull off his boots and his wet trousers and rub him all
over with a dry towel

"Your skirt is all wet Where have you been?" Sonia asked.

"It's nothing, it'll soon be dry Put his boots near the fire "

Zina sniffed and dragged the boots away

"What's in the haversack?"

"Oatcakes Take them out "

"They're wet "

"Never mind Eat them as they are . . . "

"May I?" Zina asked, squinting hungrily at the moist brown
lumps she found in the haversack

"Of course It's your dinner Sonia, divide them up Leave
some for Sasha, he'll be hungry when he wakes up "

Zina came up to her mother, holding a piece of soaked cake
in her hand

"For you, Mummy . . . "

"I don't want it, little daughter, I'm not hungry "

She watched the children eat and carefully pick up every
crumb They were eating the oatcakes which had failed to reach
the men the Germans were driving to their death She had a
lump in her throat Little heads, fair and dark, were bending
over the oatcakes, tiny fingers were carefully picking up every
last crumb Sasha had failed to get there in time .

Sasha was breathing calmly and regularly The colour had
come back to his cheeks. But Mishka . . . Mishka was gone

The thought sent a painful stab through her heart

And then she felt that something far worse, something far
more terrible had happened after the death of her son Again
she saw the procession of prisoners driven forward by blows from
rifle-butts—saw their dreadfully emaciated faces, their hollow
eyes burning with fever, their feet dripping blood on to the snow,
their thin clawlike fingers stretched out longingly towards the
bread, so near and so unattainable—and then the two dead men

on the road. . . . The image of Misha lying on the table with a bullet-hole in his chest paled and softened beside this other image.

She covered her eyes with her hand. Her boy was sleeping on the bed, the children were eating their oatcakes, Chechorikha's little ones were picking up the crumbs from the table. But every day brought fresh trouble, and no one could tell what would happen next. Where was Platon now? Would she ever see him again? Misha was lying in the earth here in the house, but Platon was no one knew where, perhaps he was being hunted like a beast, perhaps he was already dead under the snow . . . like Olena, like young Levanyuk on the gallows, like so many others. Incredible that it had lasted only one month—it seemed a whole lifetime, long years, many, many years—so many horrors and misfortunes had they brought with them. 'Only one month!' she said to herself and was amazed. In the old days the months had gone by, months of sowing and mowing, of reaping and garnering, of flax-cutting and potato-lifting—all those quiet months had passed one after the other, full of peace and of little joys and had melted unheeded into the fleeting years. But now one short month had held for her more than all the rest of life, was pressing on her with a tremendous weight, was leaving behind wounds and scars which would never heal, which would ache in her memory for ever.

Sasha woke up suddenly. He was surprised to find himself at home. How did he get there? He remembered nothing, not that his mother had carried him, not that he had gone to sleep. His eyes wandered over the ceiling. It was the ceiling of their own cottage. He heard Zina lisp something in her thin, whining voice. Then he saw his mother sitting huddled on the settee. She was staring fixedly in front of her. Sasha stretched his legs under the blankets. His toes were aching a little, but otherwise he felt nothing but a pleasant fatigue and the touch of the warm blanket and the soft pillow under his head were pleasant too.

"What are you thinking about so hard, Mummy?"

She started and quickly turned towards him.

"You awake?"

"Yes, I don't want to sleep any more."

"Well, you stay in bed. You got chilled and sopping wet; better get nice and warm right through."

She rearranged the blanket on the boy and then answered his question, as if she had only just heard it.

"I was thinking of the day, sonny, when our people will come back."

He looked at her with wide-open eyes.

"Here, to us, to our village?"

"Yes, of course, to us "

"And to Rudy, too?" he asked in a whisper, as if he were confiding a secret to her

"Of course, to Rudy as well Everywhere, up to the Dnyepyr and beyond, to all towns and villages . right up to the frontier and beyond, wherever people are dying because of the Germans everywhere, to all lands and countries . "

"And will Daddy come home too?"

"Yes, son, he'll come When the guerillas come out of the woods and return home "

"And will everything be like it was before?"

"Everything will be as before," she repeated "Yes, son, even better than before "

She stopped speaking and asked herself whether it was really possible that the time would come when everything would be as it had been before The cottage would again have a fence of sun-flowers round it, hollyhocks would grow in the garden, those large pink hollyhocks whose seeds Lida had brought from the city, the children would run laughing off to school, in the summer Zina would go to the kindergarten, there would be plenty of bread in the house, and plenty of milk in earthenware jugs In the evenings the villagers would all gather in the club to read the newspapers

All this would come again in spite of everything the Germans could do, in spite of all the wounds they had inflicted on the village True, Mishutka would never run off to school again, Mitya Levanyuk would never sing again in the fields, Olena would never drive her tractor any more, the girls would not give Vassya Kravchuk the glad eye—but life would go on for all that, vigorous, flourishing life Year after year the wheat would form its ears in the fields, the cows on the collective farm would fill the milking pails with a rising flood of milk, more and more youngsters would go away to study in the town All this would happen, if only they all held out now, if they did not give way, if only they did not give way now, whatever happened

The sun was setting It filled the cottage with a rosy light The sky grew rapidly darker and the shadows deepened The moon rose, cold as ice, and silvery as ice The colours of the sunset paled, merging with the rays of the moon, and the sparkling pillars of the aurora borealis shot up into the sky

The village sank into a heavy and restless sleep, which brought no peace to the hearts of the people, no repose to their eyes

Sasha stirred and muttered in his sleep Malyuchikha got up and went to him

"Sonny . . . sonny . . ."

"What is it?" he asked, waking with a start

"Wake up, wake up, you were having bad dreams"

He looked at his mother without understanding what she was saying, turned round and fell asleep again But soon he was again troubled by a nightmare which sat heavily on his chest and tormented him all through the night

In the detention room at the Kommandantur no one slept save Grokhach Malasha was still spinning the agonizing thread of her relentless sombre thoughts Another day had gone by and nothing had changed Her dry lips split with thirst, but still she saw *that* day before her eyes all the time Something was going on in the village, people were living and dying there—the prisoners had heard shots in the street during the day and knew the Germans did not waste their cartridges—people were dying out there, but she, Malasha, was alive, sitting there behind the thick logs of the wall, nourishing with her blood a lump of German dung, a German bastard . . .

Yevdokim sighed and fidgeted about

"What is it, can't you sleep?" Chechorikha asked

"No . . . how can one sleep here? You're not asleep either"

"No, I'm trying to guess at whom they might have been shooting . . . the shots sounded quite close"

"Hard to say whether it was close or not . . . these walls may change the sound . . . I don't think it was any nearer than the church"

"Who knows?"

"When we get out, we'll find out," Olga Palanchuk said quietly

"That's right," Chechorikha agreed

Olga was evidently anxious to hear from the others that they would all get out presently, that they would be taken out and set free, instead of being led to the green to face a German firing squad No, they would be released, go back to the village and talk to people again as free men and women talk to free men and women She heaved a sigh

"As we can't sleep anyway, you might tell us a story, Grandfather, just to pass the time"

"What sort of story shall I tell you?" Yevdokim asked. "I don't feel much like telling stories"

"Then sing us a song," Olga begged

"What? Sing? Here?"

"Why not? Sing low, so they won't hear outside"

He nodded his head in the dark

"All right, I'll sing It's an old song, my grandfather
used to sing it And he had it from his grandfather It's an
old song, as old as the Ukraine . "

He began to sing with the tremulous voice of the old .

"O! There is no justice, no justice in the world,
Injustice rules everything

O! If you want to live a good life
You must fight for justice and right "

"Oh, I can't sing like this In the old days the minstrels
sang it to the bandura "

"Well, you'll just have to sing it without a bandura . . It's
less sad like this . "

"O! May God send a blessing to those
Who are fighting for justice and right "

"O! May God send His blessing to those, who are fighting
for justice and right," Chechorikha repeated in a whisper

With his trembling voice the old man sang the ancient song
of a down-trodden people, a song born in the darkness of cruel
days, in the gloom of nights full of tears, during an age of slavery
and oppression, a forgotten song that had faded away like a bad
dream, that had been silent during the days when a liberated
Ukraine blossomed with sunflowers and a new generation sang
new songs

But here in the darkness of this narrow closet, in this village
where the corpse of a lad of sixteen swung on a gallows, where
dead men lay unburied, where the brook carried the bloody body
of a murdered woman under its ice, where death had cast its
net over all the houses, the old song sounded the same note of
complaint and sorrow, that had lain in it for hundreds of years

"O! May God send His blessing to those
Who are fighting for justice and right "

The old man's voice died away Sleep came and tired heads
sank slowly to rest.

IX

FEDOSSYA KRAVCHUK WOKE SUDDENLY AND SAT UP IN BED SHE felt as if someone had shaken her awake and her heart began to beat as if it wanted to jump out of her breast She gasped and listened

What had roused her? And when had she fallen asleep? She had thought that she could not possibly sleep and now it appeared that she had been fast asleep after all And something, she did not know what, had suddenly torn her from her sleep What was it?

It had not been a knock—complete silence reigned everywhere Not even the usual snoring of the German captain broke the silence of the night Werner had not come in yet And yet she had not woken of her own accord Something must have awakened her, something must have suddenly broken in on her sleep. That must be why her frightened heart was beating so fast

She did not lie down again, but listened intently The silence in the house and outside it was complete The wind had calmed down during the evening and the night was clear and quiet The moon swam in the heavens, encircled in a gleaming iridescent halo, and the shadow of the window-frame fell in sharp outline on the floor The geranium in its pot looked black against the white hoar-frost of the window-panes

Then suddenly she heard a rustle outside the window Something like a suppressed groan, a stifled croak, a cry forcibly smothered in the throat Fedossya jumped out of bed and in a flash was out in the passage on her bare feet She groped for the bolt with trembling hands, but it was not shot Werner was not in yet He never forgot to bolt the door carefully after coming in

She opened the door Black shadows flitted past
"Who's that?"

It was not Fedossya who had asked the question She knew who it was, had known from that first instant of her awakening, when she had had to press both hands on her heart to control its crazy hammering

"It's I," she replied in a whisper. "Quietly, boys, *he* hasn't come in yet "

They were already in the passage She recognized the little scout

"He hasn't come in yet, he must be sitting in the Kommandantur."

"Then we needn't come in here Let's go to the Kommandantur, lads!"

"Wait a minute," Fedossya whispered with feverish excitement "She is here!"

"Who is she? What is she?" The commander was in a hurry to be off

"The German's hussy "

"Time enough for that to-morrow We'll see about the German woman in the morning "

"But she isn't German, she's one of us," Fedossya said sternly

"Is that so? That's another matter Where is she?"

"Asleep in the room "

The Red Army lieutenant frowned with distaste

"All right, we'll have a look Can you give me any sort of light?"

"The sentry would see it "

"The sentry isn't there any more, mother "

"Then I'll light the lamp "

She searched for matches with hands that shook.

They had come, they had come at last!

The little scout gave her a box of matches She lit the lamp, turned up the wick . . .

"Five of our people are locked up in the Kommandantur as hostages "

"Don't worry, mother, our lads are there already, at the Kommandantur They'll release the hostages We only wanted to get the commandant out of the way on the quiet . . . "

"Nothing doing He hasn't come in yet They must be very busy to-day "

She opened the door cautiously, taking care to make no sound The Red Army men followed her, walking on tiptoe Fedossya raised the lamp in her hand to throw the light on the bed

Pussy awoke and, thinking it was Kurt who was coming in, muttered something drowsily. There was no answer She turned round and threw the hair back from her face

The lieutenant abruptly snatched the lamp from Fedossya's hand and strode forward.

"Who is this?" he asked in a terrible voice

"The German commandant's slut, from the town," Fedossya explained with surprise.

Pussy stared with round, terrified eyes at the man with the lamp The blue crêpe-de-Chine nightdress slipped from her shoulder and bared her little breast. She tucked her legs under

her and with a hardly noticeable, subconscious movement slid away towards the corner of the bed as if she were trying to hide, to escape, to crawl into some crack in the wall. The lieutenant shuddered. He saw nails covered with crimson varnish glisten in the light of the lamp, pointed white teeth gleam between lips white as paper.

"Seryosha!"

The whisper was like the whisper of the wind among leaves. But Sergei heard it, or rather he recognized his name by the movement of her lips. He was trembling. As if to defend herself, Pussy held up her hand in front of her, that tiny, feeble hand with the nails that looked as if they had been crimsoned by blood. Her round eyes were full of terror. The bed seemed enormous and the woman crouching in one corner of it looked like a doll. Her bare breast peeped out of the blue silk, her tiny feet protruded under the hem of the nightdress.

A shot was fired outside.

"That was near the Kommandantur," Fedossya said.

More shots rang out from every direction.

Sergei raised his pistol. He looked steadily into the familiar black eyes. The shot cracked. Pussy gave a little start. Her lips opened, showing a row of glistening, pointed white teeth. Her round eyes opened wider still, and grew fixed in a glassy stare.

"To the Kommandantur," commanded Sergei, and, stumbling over the threshold and over the buckets in the kitchen, the men ran out into the moonlit, silver-coloured street.

The fight was on. The first shot they had heard inside the cottage had been fired by a private of the detachment which was to seize the German battery of guns.

While Sergei and his men were creeping up to Fedossya's cottage to seize the German commander in his sleep, another detachment was crawling over the snow up the hill towards the guns. Invisible in their white cloaks, hiding in the shadows, using every bit of cover, they reached the battery. Their sergeant, Serdyuk, was in the lead. The dark barrels of the guns stood out clearly from the background of snow and sky. Their monstrous, silent throats rose high above the heads of the approaching Red Army men. Three German soldiers were sitting by the guns and talking in undertones. A sentry walked to and fro in front of the battery. The snow creaked under his boots.

Serdyuk held his breath and waited. The sentry turned round at the edge of the ditch. The sergeant saw his narrow back, and the bayonet sticking out above his head. He quietly crept

out of the ditch and pounced on the German. The two men rolled in the snow. Serdyuk grabbed the German by the throat before he could utter a cry. But the gun-crew had noticed the sudden disappearance of their comrade.

"Hi, Hansl," one of them called out in alarm. At that moment one of the Red Army men carelessly trod on a dry twig. It snapped with a revealing crackle. The rifles of the gun-crew flew up to their shoulders and a Red Army man lost his head and fired at the man nearest him. The German fell on his back. Then things happened so quickly that the Red Army men themselves were thunderstruck—before they knew where they were, no German was left near the guns and the battery was in their hands. At the same time they heard shots fired from the direction in which their maps showed the German Kommandantur to be.

"At the double, lads," shouted Serdyuk, but that instant black shadows rose in front of them.

The Germans had discovered that the attackers were few in number and ran along openly, without even bending down. They fired and Serdyuk fell on his knees. He felt a sudden pain in his right leg.

"What happened?"

"Nothing. Now then, give them a burst!"

One of the Germans fell but that did not stop the rest. They all had tommy-guns and the bursts merged into an uninterrupted chatter.

"Lie down, lads, shoot from the ground."

The Red Army men crouched behind the guns. The dark figures of the Germans offered good targets against the snow. Serdyuk took careful aim. He was anxious not to waste any cartridges. His cheek felt terribly cold and he realized that it was from the butt of the automatic rifle. His forehead, his nose, his cheeks were freezing.

He reloaded his automatic. Looking downwards along the rifle he saw a large black pool on the snow.

"Fire! Volley fire!"

What was that pool in which he was kneeling? His trousers were quite wet. And that was strange in such a frost. As if some one had poured water over them.

The Germans were by now lying in the roadside ditch on the other side of the green and shooting without pause. Serdyuk raised his head above the hillock of snow which protected his face and appraised the situation. This rifle duel from the ditch to the guns and from behind the guns to the ditch might go on for ever. Meanwhile there was shooting all over the village and

he didn't know how things were going His group of five men might come in very useful somewhere

"Here, boys, we can't be bothered with them all this time Rush 'em! Hurrah! For the motherland! For Stalin!"

They jumped out like one man Bending down as they ran, they rushed into the chatter of machine-guns and automatics, their bayonets levelled In a few leaps they had reached the ditch and sprang from above right on top of the surprised Germans They struck with all their force added to all their weight The roadside ditch fired no more The German corpses lay on the snow and looked very small and pitiful

"Where do we go from here?" asked one of the Red Army men, breathlessly

But Serdyuk gave no reply The men looked round in surprise

"Comrade Serdyuk, where are you?"

"Something's wrong," said Alexei, closest friend of Serdyuk

"Did he come with us or didn't he?"

"Are you crazy? Of course he was running with us!"

"Where has he got to, then?"

"Here he is, here!" shouted Vanya, the youngest of them all. Alexei ran back

Serdyuk was lying half-way between the guns and the ditch, his arms flung wide, one hand gripping his automatic

"What happened?" Vanya whispered dully

Alexei looked at the snow

The bright moonlight showed clearly a pool of blood and a bloody trail from the guns to the spot where Serdyuk lay

"Where did they get him?"

Alexei pointed in silence The foot and part of the leg were unnaturally bent, almost at right angles to the rest of the leg The snow all around it had turned into a black pool

"They have shot his leg in two, as if cut with a knife "

"Look, and he ran with that leg all this way!"

"No time to look now Come on, lads, to the Kommandantur, things seem sticky there "

They hurried along. It was Alexei who took the lead now. The cold cut like a knife and their chests hurt at every breath.

When the first shot was fired, Captain Werner was sleeping on a camp bed in the Kommandantur. He was expecting a ring from headquarters and could not go home He was lying fully dressed, covered with his overcoat. The sergeant was fast asleep

on the other side of the room. In the next room the soldiers were as usual lying on the floor pell-mell. The captain waited a long time but the telephone was silent. The snores coming from the next room and the snorts of the sergeant irritated him. The camp bed was hard and uncomfortable. Finally he fell asleep. The sound of a shot woke him.

'Some idiot prowling about in the village again,' he thought angrily. He was annoyed by this fresh proof of the obstinate disregard of German orders by the villagers.

But almost immediately there was another shot, then another and another. The captain jumped up.

"Sause! Get up!"

The sergeant was already on his feet. He was not even sleepy now. Footsteps came crunching under the window and soldiers rushed in.

"The Bolsheviks are in the village!"

"Bolt the doors! Put the light out!" Werner commanded, and the men ran to shoot the heavy bolts and put up the shutters.

The room which contained the telephone was the largest in the house and best suited to purposes of defence. Although it had never occurred to Werner that he might have to defend himself in here in real earnest, he had as a matter of routine made every preparation for such a contingency. The strong door of thick boards had been covered with iron plates and the locks and hinges strengthened. The walls were of mighty logs and there were strong shutters on the windows. The house was old and had obviously been intended to serve as a store. The part where the soldiers slept and where the hostages were imprisoned was a later addition built to house the village soviet, the "red corner" and the library. Here the walls were thinner and the door was closed by a simple lock and key. But in the older part one could imagine oneself in a fort.

"Open the loopholes!"

The soldiers hurriedly removed the logs placed at the bottom of the walls, revealing narrow slits cut almost at floor level and framed with sandbags. The soldiers lay down. Cold air rushed into the room through the loopholes and formed clouds of vapour. The rifles began to bark.

"Ring up headquarters! Quick!" Werner commanded. One of the sentries, who had come running with news of the attack, was fitting an ammunition band into a machine-gun.

"Are they guerillas?" Werner asked the sentry.

"No. The Red Army."

"Many of them?"

"I don't know, sir They are shooting from every direction, they must have surrounded us "

Werner swore

"Got through to H Q yet?"

"No, sir, the telephone is out of order "

Werner jumped to the table and snatched the receiver from Sause But it was in vain that he shouted into the mouthpiece and banged his fist on the silent box The telephone was dead

"They've cut the line, the swine " He brushed the useless box away with his fist The telephone fell to the floor with a clatter He kicked it away into a corner

"We'll manage without it Attention!"

Shots cracked in the street and they could hear the smack of bullets hitting the thick logs of the wall In the next room rifle-butts were battering at the door, but the door held

"Bang away!" the captain muttered He was sure of the solidity of his doors

The attack on the Kommandantur was led by Lieutenant Shalov. Hardly had his men succeeded in breaking in the first door and entering the building when the group which had taken the guns came running up

"Where's Serdyuk?"

"Killed The battery is taken "

In the first room they found the soldiers' beds and equipment scattered all over the floor, but not a living soul

"Aha, the vipers, they've locked themselves in the other room."

"We'll smoke them out, don't worry "

A log was noisily moved inside and shots were fired through a loophole giving on the outer room

"Get outside! We'll tackle them from outside!"

They scattered and surrounded the house, but saw at once that they were up against a sort of fort The great tree-trunks would withstand mere bullets Chips flew from the walls, but the walls themselves stood as solid as ever Machine-guns barked sharply and blue and red sparks flew from the loopholes, spitting death

"They are pretty generous with their cartridges," Shalov muttered

"They must have been prepared for defence, comrade lieutenant "

There was shooting throughout the village. Each Red Army

detail was fighting its own group of Germans at their posts. But the din from the besieged house drowned every other noise.

"Well, lads, we've got to take them before dawn, can't waste much more time. In the morning some unit of theirs may come past by chance and spoil everything."

They lay down, using any cover they could find, and tried to knock out the enemy guns by sniping at their barrels as they were pushed through the loopholes. But it was no good. The German automatics never ceased firing for an instant.

The Germans billeted on the Levanyuks were taken unawares. Red Army men, rushing into the cottage, found them asleep. They jumped up in terror, tried to snatch up their rifles lying within reach, caught their feet in the cartridge belts carelessly thrown down on the floor.

"Lie down on the floor," Red Army man Minchenko shouted at Levanyuchikha, who stared at them, scared out of her wits.

She obediently flopped on the floor, and pushed her youngest under the bed. But before she could take in what was happening the house was quiet again. The Red Army men had vanished like a dream, and on the floor were German soldiers, dressed only in their underclothing, lying dead.

"Come, Vassiyutka, give a hand, we'll throw this carrion out of here," she said to her son, still trembling. The two of them began to drag the bodies outside. Grunting with the effort, they hauled the Germans towards the door by the legs. Vassya was only twelve years old, his mother pregnant and near her time.

"Not so fast, not so fast, what's your hurry!" she shouted at her son.

But Vassya knew very well what his hurry was. Having failed to slip out in time after the Red Army men, he had now been caught by his mother to do this silly job. There was shooting in the village and shouting and she was keeping him here to drag dead Germans about by the legs instead of running out there and seeing everything with his own eyes. They might even give him a rifle. Who knows? They might!

The silence in which the attack on the village began had long been broken. Now no one crept quietly along fences, carefully avoiding even the throwing of a shadow across the road.

"Remember, lads, not a single one of them must escape, not a soul," the lieutenant told the men as they split up into groups on approaching the village. The men understood that the success of the whole enterprise depended on this.

The conduct of the Germans varied in different places. Some of them defended themselves in the cottages, others rushed out

into the open in their underclothes but took their rifles and ammunition with them. Half naked in the cruel frost, they took cover behind corners or fences and stubbornly continued firing.

"Don't get in our way! Clear out!" Sergei shouted at the village women who suddenly appeared as if by magic all over the place and got into the line of fire of both parties.

"Comrades, there are six Germans, six of them, in my house! Come quick!" Pelcharikha plucked a Red Army man by the sleeve in her excitement.

"Where's that?"

"Just you come along, I'll show you where, it's quite near only a few paces, . . ." she wheedled, as if praising a house she wanted to let.

The Red Army men followed her, but soon saw that the job would not be an easy one. Loopholes had been cut into the walls here, and death was lurking in each of them.

Pelcharikha lay down on the ground together with the fighting men. A young lad next to her put his hand on his chest and groaned, then his head sank down on his rifle.

"This is no good, lads!" she shouted. "They can stay inside the house and pick you off one by one. Burn down the house!"

"Is this your house?"

"Of course it's mine, whose else? Set fire to it! Go on!"

"Is there no one in the house?"

Pelcharikha clenched her fist.

"The baby. The elder ones ran out, but . . . the baby . . . it's in the cradle . . ."

"Well, then, how can we fire the house? Are you off your head, woman?"

Pelcharikha seized the Red Army man by the sleeve.

"No matter, no matter, I say! You can't all perish because of my baby . . . I'm the mother and I tell you, set fire to the house!"

"What are you saying, mother? With the child inside?"

"Burn down the house! If I can bear it, why can't you? There you are, look!"

A second Red Army man was hurriedly bandaging his hand. Blood was soaking through the bandage and forming great red stains.

The fighting men were no longer listening to Pelcharikha, but she still insisted.

"Now then, get out of the way, mother, they'll only kill you if you stay here. Can't you see they're shooting this way?"

"Nonsense, who would want to shoot at an old woman. . . ."

Firing ceased from one of the loopholes

"There! You see? All we need do is to shoot properly and everything will be fine "

"Well, lads, if you won't burn the house, then what about getting in through the roof from the other side?"

"Now that's a much better idea, mother! Where can we get in? Show the way "

A few men stayed behind and continued firing with redoubled vigour. The others followed Pelcharikha. A few seconds later they were at close quarters with the Germans inside the cottage.

Then Pelcharikha opened the door wide and shouted "Don't shoot any more!"

The men who had remained outside went in. The Germans lay dead inside, one with his face on his machine-gun, the others stabbed with bayonets.

"Look, Seryosha, I got him right in the head!"

The sniper surveyed his work with pride.

Yes, the German had been killed instantly. Pelcharikha ran to the cradle.

"They've killed it," she said in a dead, dull voice.

The Red Army man looked. The little body lay lifeless in the woman's arms. The head was smashed in. The cradle was full of blood.

"It must have cried in its cradle and they killed it, the filthy beasts . . ."

Pelcharikha stood with the dead child in her arms, mechanically dandling the little body.

"See? And you didn't want to burn the house because of the child . . . Two men were hurt because of it . . ."

"Hush, mother, hush . . ."

"Oh, I won't cry, son, I'll be quiet. If only you'd give me a rifle. . ."

The shooting was now dying down in the village. The fight was over, except for the Kommandantur. The sky was already paling, the moon with its pearly aura was fading and the two iridescent pillars of light on both sides of it were slowly melting away. The air was an endless space of blue and the whole world seemed like a glass sphere filled with ice. Only the little red flashes of the shots fired at the Kommandantur broke into the monotonous blue and silver of the dawn.

"This won't do, lads. Better throw a grenade at the window, perhaps those shutters are not so very strong."

"But how to get near enough? They're firing away like mad."

It was true that a ceaseless stream of fire was pouring from

the loopholes. The shots chattered on without pause and tiny clouds of snow spurted up in hundreds of places at once.

"It is getting lighter," Shalov said with concern, glancing up at the paling sky. A pink streak was already showing far away on the horizon. The struggle had lasted longer than he had expected. German forces might come with the day, possibly reinforcements might arrive. Under the mantle of darkness many things might remain unnoticed. But the day would free the Germans from the fear of the unknown and reveal the smallness of the attacking force. If anyone took the slightest interest in the German unit, the lack of telephone communications would be noticed, and the fat would be in the fire.

"Well, lads, what are we going to do?"

"Nothing much we can do in a hurry, comrade lieutenant, unless we throw a grenade."

"We must try it then," Sergei said suddenly.

"How can we?"

"I'll try it."

Sergei made a wide circle round the house and then crawled close, approaching from the side where there were no loopholes at the corner. The Red Army men ceased fire so as not to hit him.

"What can he have in mind?" Shalov asked himself in alarm. But Sergei crept calmly nearer.

In the cold twilight of the dawn they could see the barrel of an automatic move in the dark hole of the aperture, seeking a target and then doggedly firing on and on, belching death.

Then Sergei jumped up quickly. Before the Red Army men realized what was happening, he appeared between them and the deadly loophole, drew himself up to his full height and threw a bundle of hand-grenades into the window with a swing. There was a jangle, a crash and a cloud of smoke. A flame shot up. The man in front of the window seemed to rise into the air and then it seemed as if it took a very long time for him to fall. His tall form stood out dark against the fiery background. Then he staggered and slowly collapsed on the ground.

"Forward!" Shalov commanded.

They rushed at the window. The machine-gun was silent. It was covered with blood. The machine-gunners were silent too. The grenades had done their work.

"Come on, lads!"

They tumbled in through the hole torn by the grenades, never noticing that they were cutting their hands on the glass of the broken windows. Tongues of flames shot up along the thick logs.

Suddenly Malyuchikha shrieked. "Our people are in there, five of them!"

Only then did everyone remember the hostages.

They, the hostages, were sitting in the dark room, leaning against the walls and listening. They were not asleep when the first shot was fired and had all heard it. It sounded to them like a beat of their own hearts. They waited a second. But another shot followed the first. There was no room for doubt—this was not the chance shot of a sentry.

"Our people are here," Chechorikha said in a high, breaking voice.

"Yes, ours," Olga whispered.

Malasha alone made no movement and still sat looking into the darkness with the same fixed stare.

"It's near the church," Yevdokim remarked.

"Where the guns are . . ."

A shot rang out quite near the wall. Olga screamed.

They were sitting there, caught in a trap. It was dark and they could see nothing at all. Outside shots were being fired, people were running about, fighting was going on and they saw nothing of it and could not even guess what was happening.

"The Germans will knock us on the head before our people can get to us," Grokhach thought, but he said nothing, so as not to frighten the women. He listened with emotion to the sounds penetrating to them from outside. They heard rifle-bullets crashing against the door and the heavy tread of men in the next room. Grokhach began beating on the door with his fists.

"Hallo, there! Let us out! Let us out!"

But no one heard him in the din outside.

"Come on, women, help a bit, or they'll never hear us! How much longer are we going to sit here?"

Olga jumped up and started to beat on the wall with her fists. Chechorikha followed suit.

"Hallo, there! Let us out!"

But the din, the shouting, the shooting continued outside and there was no response to the cries of the hostages.

"Harder, bang harder, women! They must hear us sooner or later!"

"What's this? Has no one in the village told them about us? Have they forgotten us, or what?"

Their fists drummed on the door again, but now they heard a great trampling of feet outside. The Red Army men were obviously leaving the house. There was silence for a while. The

hostages saw a precipice opening at their feet All hope of rescue seemed at an end

"What's this?" Yevdokim asked in a toneless voice "Are our lads giving up?"

Olga began to sob.

"Shut up, silly creature! And you too, Yevdokim, you may be old but you're a fool for all that! They are trying from the other side, can't you hear?"

No one spoke The noise and rattle of shots now reached them from the opposite direction with increased intensity

"They are trying to get in from the street "

"Whose machine-gun would that be?"

"German but this one's ours, can't you hear it?"

Huddled together in a heap they listened excitedly Only Malasha was still sitting motionless, as if all this were no concern of hers

"Oh, my God, merciful God," Yevdokim sighed.

Grokhach stared at him

"What's that? Are you thinking of praying?"

"Why shouldn't he pray if he wants to?" Chechorikha intervened hotly on the old man's behalf "If he did it would be none of your business "

Yevdokim knelt down in front of the door and began praying in his tremulous old voice "From hunger, earthquake, disease and enemy onslaught, save us, O Lord . . . "

Grokhach shrugged his shoulders The shooting was still going on outside Suddenly there was a terrible crash, and the house shook and trembled with it

"O-o-oh!" Olga screamed

They heard voices The noise increased. Somewhere, quite near, a woman's voice screamed horribly Almost immediately afterwards rifle-butts were hammering at the door again.

"Get away from that door," commanded Grokhach

They stepped back The door flew open

It seemed to them as if bright daylight were shining into their darkness, although the next room was lit only by the pale dawn mungling with red tongues of flame Malyuchikha rushed in, panting.

"Our people are here! Come out!" she shouted laughing and weeping and clutching at Chechorikha's sleeve. "Your children are with us, they're all right Our people are in the village "

"Sh, not so much noise, women!" Grokhach scolded them.

"Let's get out of here!"

Malasha leapt up from the ground and ran out without a

word A young Red Army man was sitting on the threshold bandaging his foot With a resolute gesture she snatched up a German rifle lying beside him

"Here, put that down," he said, and reached for the rifle, but held back when he saw the look in her half-crazed black eyes

"Phew, a madwoman "

"Let her have it," Grokhach intervened "Aren't there enough German rifles about?"

A shout rose from behind the house

"He got away! The German got away!"

.

Captain Werner was almost smothered by the smoke It was quite dark in the closed, shuttered room and the smoke from the constant firing made his throat ache and his eyes smart The barrels of the rifles were red-hot A wounded soldier moaned incessantly Werner wanted to turn round and fire straight into the face of this soldier, but he could not leave his automatic even for an instant The wounded were sprawling in disorder all over the room Werner knew that he would never get out alive He had been taken completely unawares, stupidly, unexpectedly surprised at a time when an enemy attack seemed utterly out of the question Yes, those fellows at headquarters were thinking only of gram and bacon and demanding supplies all the time. But of course they couldn't be bothered with such trifles as safeguarding the road leading to the village They trembled at the mention of the guerillas, were constantly in a dither about them but had not the faintest idea of what was going on in the district or where the Bolshevik positions were

Captain Werner was nonplussed According to all information the front line was supposed to be very far away—and now suddenly his Kommandantur was surrounded, not by guerillas—that might happen anywhere in the rear—but by regular forces, by a unit of the Red Army. Grain indeed! Now those fellows at headquarters could whistle for their grain

The wounded man was moaning louder now—he had been shot through the body. Was it really possible that no one was aware of what was going on here, Werner asked himself His ears were singing with the noise and his head felt as if it would burst. How long could they hold out? The line was cut and there was no chance of communicating with anyone. He heard the shooting die down in the village, heard the noise increase on the green in front of the Kommandantur and knew that his unit

was already routed and that the Kommandantur was the last position still offering resistance.

Suddenly the floor heaved under his feet and a terrible explosion shattered the smoke-blackened air of the room. The blast threw him back against the wall. He heard shouts, the shutters fell off and he realized that a bundle of hand-grenades had been thrown at the window. Flames shot up around him. He felt a painful stab in the shoulder. Lumps of flesh, fragments of legs and arms littered the floor. No, there was nothing more to be done here. He darted into the next room, a small closet with only one loophole. It was quieter in here, though the machine-gunner at the loophole was still pressing the trigger of his gun and shooting into space. But there was no longer any response from outside. The enemy had obviously withdrawn from that side altogether. Werner quickly pulled back the bolt and the shutters swung open with a creak. The window flew out at a blow from his fist. He jumped into the snow without bothering to see whether there was anyone there who would shoot him on sight. He gulped down a mouthful of fresh icy air. The snow-glare dazzled him. He heard the trampling of feet and the shouting of many voices behind him. The Red Army men had broken into the house. With huge strides he ran to the nearest building that promised cover. It was the Malyuk barn.

But suddenly his way was barred. Malasha was there, gripping the German rifle by the barrel. Werner saw her sun-tanned face and large black blazing eyes come at him. Her dishevelled hair curled round her terrifying, resolute face. She swung the rifle with all the force of her strong arms high over her head. Werner threw up his pistol with lightning swiftness and pulled the trigger. The shot cracked but at the same time the rifle-butt came down on his skull with terrific force. He cried out and fell on his back. His nose was broken, his forehead smashed in and blood gushed over his face. He was choking in his own blood. It filled his throat, ran into his eyes, and gurgled in his windpipe in a thick sticky stream. He gasped for breath.

Two paces away Malasha was lying on the ground. She had heard the shot together with the crunching of broken bones. The bullet in her body caused her no pain. It had hit her in the body, just where it was wanted. No, there was no pain, only gladness. A happy smile appeared on her lips. The expression which had stamped her face with the cold mask of old age for the past month vanished without leaving a trace. The Malasha lying there in the snow with arms outspread and her face turned to the sky, was the old black-eyed Malasha, brown as a berry, the prettiest lass in

the village. She still gripped the rifle in one hand, but all that was already far away, floating away in the iridescent radiance, in the cold azure of the morning, in the sparkling of the snow lit by the first rays of the sun.

Those first rays woke the rainbow. Its pale arc had been visible in the sky all night, but only as an indistinct whitish streak in the depths of the dark sky. But now the sun was filling it with brilliance, warmth and colour and it shone again in the heavens with pure hues, delicate as the bloom on the petals of a blossom.

Malasha's eyes were fixed on the bright arc spanning the sky high above her head. Her life was ebbing out of her body with her blood. Her fingers were growing stiff, her feet were icy, her whole body was very cold. But it was with contented eyes that she looked up at the iridescent semi-circle, at the bright road sweeping across the heavens from horizon to horizon. Malasha was walking along that bright path. Malasha, the prettiest lass in all the village, the best worker on the collective farm, the girl whose picture had been in the newspapers, and for whom the summer night blossomed with love.

There was no more snow, no more frost. New-mown hay was rustling under her head. Fresh water gurgled somewhere close by. A delicious scent rose from the grass, the girls were singing, the lads were laughing, an accordion wailed in the quiet of the evening. Her eyes sought the rainbow in the sky—but there was no rainbow, it was a summer night, Ivan was laughing gladly, she saw his eyes quite near her face, those clear grey eyes under their black brows. The picture faded into the darkness of night. And yet there had been a rainbow, there had been one just a little while ago. Malasha wanted to see the rainbow once more, to fill her eyes with its radiance.

She struggled up, supporting herself on her elbows. A savage pain shot through her body and she fell back on to the snow. She felt she was dying, knew it for certain, and her hands went up to grasp the coloured band over her head, the rainbow flung across the firmament. But her fingers grasped only darkness. Her eyes glazed over, but still she looked into the sky. Her white teeth gleamed between her half-open lips and her face froze in a strange, anguished smile.

.

The village was in an uproar—the women were rounding up the Germans. Terpilikha found a fugitive in her own pigsty. He had thrown away his rifle, rushed in through the open door and

was now hiding under a bundle of straw in one corner. But his tracks in the snow had given him away. Terpilikha didn't wait to call the Red Army men. She armed herself and the two Grokhach daughters with rakes and pitchforks and cautiously approached the sty.

"Hey, Fritz, come out of there! Look, Frossya, he's there, in the straw."

"Keep back and I'll grope for him with the pitchfork!"

"Get at him from the wall, he may shoot, the dirty scum."

The besieged warrior could not understand a word of what they were saying, but through a screen of straw he saw the pitchfork raised to pierce him. He crawled out in a hurry, shaking off the straw. He was dressed in the tattered remnants of a uniform and his head was wrapped in a lady's combination of a poisonous purple colour.

"Here's a fine gentleman for you, girls, just look at him! Come on, you, get out of there!"

The frightened German hurriedly moved to the door. He stumbled over the threshold.

"Look how he crawls. Higher, put your paws up higher! Frossya, go look in the straw, there may be a rifle there, it would come in useful."

Frossya carefully searched the sty.

"No, he must have thrown it away somewhere else."

"There's a hero for you. And look at the fine boots he's wearing." Terpilikha remarked.

The feet of the German were wrapped in rags.

"His feet must be frostbitten, look how he crawls along."

"No one asked him to come here. Why didn't he stay where he belonged and warm himself by the stove as much as he liked? But he had to come here to take away our land. . . ."

In the street people gathered around.

"Where did you get him, Terpilikha?"

"Ho, ho, look what Terpilikha's found!"

"And what business is that of yours? Can't you see I am escorting a prisoner? Better go and look in your own sties and sheds, rather than stand and stare at me. They've all crawled away like blackbeetles, but they must all be caught."

"The woman is right," lame Alexander said. "Come on, let's go search for them."

They all scattered and came back armed with pitchforks, shovels, and axes.

"Let's all go together!"

"The more the merrier!"

"Oho, Lenka is afraid she might step on a German . . ."

"If need be, I can step on one so hard, he'd be dead before he could say 'ouch'!"

"Now, then, women," Alexander pleaded, "talk less and do more!"

The whole crowd moved from cottage to cottage. They shook up the straw in the sheep-folds and looked into every sty. The children squeaked with glee, got in everybody's way and peeped in everywhere. Sasha rushed up to the crowd and panted "There's a German in our sty!"

Jostling each other, they all ran towards the cottage and proudly led out a German who was shaking with fear. The Red Army men, also searching the village, smiled when they saw the crowd of women. But the women knew every corner, nook and cranny in the village and could therefore find more Germans.

"Well, boys, and who has taken the most prisoners?"

"You, of course," the fighting men admitted, laughing.

"Where's their commander?" Shalov was uneasy. "Go on, boys, find him, he couldn't have escaped."

They looked among the dead Germans, but there were only privates and one sergeant.

"The captain! We must find the captain!"

But Werner was lying in the deep snow behind the barn. One eye had been knocked out by the blow from the rifle-butt. The other looked straight into the infinity of the sky. The pain in his head was beyond endurance. It felt as if a tremendous hammer was beating inside it incessantly and red, russet and purple sparks were flying from it in every direction. A fire was blazing in the eye that was no longer there and blood was trickling down his throat. Werner hurriedly swallowed the blood, swallowed again and choked on it, but the blood still ran as if from an inexhaustible source, from a bottomless well. He had to swallow again and again. He realized that this fluid with its insipid taste would choke him or drown him if he failed to swallow it all. His throat ached and he could no longer swallow properly. Painful cramps of the palate convulsed his whole body. He felt that he was freezing, that he would inevitably freeze to death if somebody didn't find him soon and help him. He shuddered. Who could help him here? Only the peasants, the accursed peasants of this accursed village. He was suddenly terrified that he might not die after all and be at the mercy of the peasant pitchforks or be taken prisoner by the Bolsheviks. It was quiet all round; no more shooting. He did not deceive himself, he knew that his unit was done for, that the others had won. He felt a sharp pang

stab his heart He—he—Captain Werner had been taken unawares by these clods in grey coats How could such a thing have happened?

He fixed his one eye on the distant blueness as if seeking an answer to his question there And there he saw the rainbow—a giant semicircle spanning the horizon from edge to edge, a radiant ribbon connecting earth and sky, its soft colours soaked in light Werner's dazed mind dimly recalled that he had seen that rainbow before Yes, it was before the blizzard What had that woman told him then? She had said rainbows were good omens

Captain Werner groaned. The rainbow beamed at him It had been a good omen—but not for him The rainbow shone gladly, but he saw it no longer He was in darkness

X

THEY BURIED THE DEAD ON THE GREEN BY THE CHURCH THOSE who had died that night and those who had been lying in the snow of the gully all the month

Fedosya Kravchuk helped to recover the body of her son She held the motionless, strangely light head and felt his soft hair caressing her fingers She gazed without grief or bitterness into the black face that looked as if carved out of wood Vassya had not waited in vain Brotherly hands had dug him out of the snow, the hands of brothers were burying him in a common grave together with his brothers

The sledge moved slowly up the steep slope of the knoll Fedosya walked beside it, holding up the body of her son so that it should not slip off and fall into the snow again With tender, motherly hands she arranged the bodies of the others, those unknown men who had been lying side by side with her Vassya so long

"We'll bury the girl in the same grave She was killed in action like a soldier," Shalov decided

"She is not a girl, she's a married woman with a husband in the army," Malyuchikha said, but when Malasha's body was brought to the graveside she thought she had been mistaken This girl lying in the snow was quite young, just as she had been a year ago, before the noisy, merry wedding

"She's beautiful," one of the Red Army men said in a low voice

Yes, this was Malasha, the handsomest lass in the village. Her long lashes threw a shadow on her cheeks Her hair lay in

soft waves round her face. The dark eyebrows lay on her smooth, clear forehead, like the spread wings of a swallow. The face was fixed in an anguished smile, a smile that held the eye and would not let it go.

Very carefully they took Levanyuk's body from the gallows. Levanyuchikha was already feeling the first pangs of childbirth but she refused to stay away. Tenderly she received into her arms the stiff black corpse of her son, the son who had dangled on the gallows for a whole month in the snow and wind.

"Carefully, carefully," she warned them, as if it were still possible to hurt him, as if he could still feel their touch.

The girls helped her. The body was light, almost weightless, and the sixteen-year-old face looked like the face of a child carved in wood.

The grave they dug was large and wide and they laid them all in, all in a row, the rigid black bodies of the men killed a month ago, and the mutilated remains of Sergei Radchenko and Serdyuk who looked as if he were asleep, and the young sniper who was shot near the Kommandantur, and Malasha. Shalov spoke in the name of them all. His stern, simple words carried far in the clear air, rising up towards the rainbow-girded sky.

The whole village—women, old men and children—stood round the grave and listened while they looked down at the fighters of the Red Army and Malasha lying in the earth side by side. No one wept. They stood bareheaded and grave. Fedossya Kravchuk was committing the body of her only son to their native earth. Old Sharikha was giving the earth the remains of her daughter. The others were strangers, but all felt as if they were burying their own sons, their own husbands, their own brothers.

That day none were nearer and dearer to the villagers than these dead, whose mortal faces were turned towards the sky for the last time. They were fighters of the Red Army. *Their Army.*

"The mother country will never forget them," Shalov said, his voice soft with emotion.

Yes, they knew that they, too, could never forget the faces of those who had perished, nor this day on which they had been committed to the earth. A common grave united those who perished in the retreat from the village, and these who had come to free it, and had succeeded in tearing it from the hands of the enemy.

The faces of the people were calm. This was war. It had smitten the village with blood, fire and iron. But the people

were full of unshakable faith, the same faith that had upheld them all through the blackest, most terrible days. They had believed all along that their time would come, that the last word would be theirs.

Shalov bent down, took a lump of frozen earth and threw it into the grave. And after him all the others bent down to throw a clod of their common native earth into the grave. Let the dead sleep quietly in their grave, with their own free earth on their breasts.

"You too, Niura, you too," a mother said to her two-year-old little daughter.

The child picked up a tiny handful of earth and carefully let it drop into the grave. Then the Red Army men came with shovels. Soon the pit was filled in and a mound rose over the grave.

"We'll plant flowers in the spring," Malyuchikha said.

"And green grass," added Frossya. "A square of turf from each garden."

Slowly the crowd dispersed. There was no grief in their hearts, only a solemn triumph. The dead had died for their own land. It had happened before, it had happened in the year eighteen, as they all remembered. Plenty of people of the village had been killed then. Such was the scheme of things that the land had to be defended with the blood and lives of the people who were born of it and lived on it. That was clear and simple.

The people dispersed in silence but a few minutes later noise and the sound of voices could be heard all over the village. The women were insistent in their hospitality to the fighting men, they wanted to welcome them, feed them, see them sitting at their fireside.

A whole delegation presented itself before Shalov.

"Comrade commander, we have come with a request," Terpilikha began. "We should like to offer our guests good food, but we haven't got any."

Shalov laughed.

"Well, what can I do about that?" he asked.

"That is to say we have got plenty, only we want help. Everything is buried, hidden in the ground. We hid everything away when the Germans were getting near. And now we can't dig it up, the ground is like a stone. We have no tools, but you have, and if you could lend us some men, they would do the job in double quick time."

"We can do that. Hi, men, who wants to help?"

There were plenty of volunteers. The women led them off to the fields, through the waist-deep snow

"Here, under this bush!"

"What nonsense, Mother, it was over there!"

"Mind your own business! As if I didn't know!"

Alexander fussed over his guests like a hen over its chicks

"A lamb, we must slaughter a lamb and cook it in the kettle; that will make a fine dinner for you "

"But you have only got one!"

"Yes, only one I had more, but the Germans ate them, only this one was left "

"Surely you don't think we're going to eat up your last sheep? We'll do nothing of the kind "

Alexander begged hard "You're hurting my feelings, lads I give it to you with all my heart and soul What else can I give my guests? All I've got is this one sheep . . Don't refuse me, don't offend me "

The women dragged everything they had out of their hiding-places in the ground, in the lofts, from under the floorboards. There was bacon and ham of the pigs killed in the autumn, bundles of garlic which the Germans hadn't touched, jars of honey, even sunflower seeds Those who still had a cow hurriedly milked it so that the wounded men could have milk to drink

The wounded were lodged in the two rooms of the village soviet Frossya, who had at one time attended first-aid classes, was already busy at work there, to the general envy of all. She rushed fussily from one room to the other in a white apron and a tight white headdress. The other women and girls crowded in the doorway.

"And what can I do for *you*?" a jolly young doctor asked them in passing During the night he had taken part in the assault on the Kommandantur and was now just finishing the bandaging of the wounded

"We want to help—in the hospital. "

"No help wanted I've taken two of your girls and we have our own dressers "

"We thought perhaps to scrub the floors . it's dirty in here . . "

"The floor? Yes, good idea, scrub it by all means "

The women ran to fetch pails and cloths and soon a whole army of them marched back to the hospital

"What's this, are all of you going to scrub the floor?"

The women started quarrelling among themselves—in whispers, so as not to disturb the wounded

Finally they divided up the floor and each began to scrub her own little bit

"The blankets are slipping off the wounded and you pay no attention," Pysichikha said severely to Frossya

"If you see it slipping, why don't you put it back?" Frossya barked, hurrying past with a basin full of blood-stained water

Pysichikha went up to the bed and slowly and carefully rearranged the blanket on the wounded man. After that she stayed with the wounded

"What are you doing here?" the doctor asked, noticing her

"I'm arranging blankets. The blankets are always slipping off them," she replied with dignity and rearranged the pillow under the head of a wounded man

The doctor waved his hand

"All right, go ahead and arrange them if you want to so badly "

Yes, she wanted to, very very badly. All the women wanted to. To help ever so little, to bring a glass of water, to wash out a mug, launder a pair of socks, smooth back a lock of hair from a forehead, see that no one left a door open to let in the cold.

Lida Grokhach timidly tiptoed into the room

"You want to help too?" the doctor asked

She shook her head

"A woman is having a child if you could come you are a doctor "

"But I'm a surgeon "

"A doctor's a doctor. She's in a bad way. This morning she dragged the Germans out of the cottage by the legs and it was then that the pains began "

"Well, there's nothing for it, I suppose I must go," the doctor decided good-humouredly. "A new citizen is being born, he must have help. I leave the wounded to you, Kuzma. Let's go "

Lida showed him the way to the Levanyuk cottage at a run. The doctor followed her, rubbing his bare hands

"You ought to have put on your mitts, in this frost!"

"I had mitts, but they got lost last night. . . Must have dropped them somewhere. Now I haven't got any "

She threw him a shy glance and then hurriedly pulled off her own thick knitted gloves, embroidered with red and blue wool

"No, no!" the doctor protested. "And what about you?"

"I've got another pair," she lied. "I hid them away well, the Germans didn't find them, and you are a doctor, you must look after your hands "

He saw that her lips were trembling and that she was on the verge of tears. He laughed

"All right, then, if you are so obstinate, I'll take them"

The passage of the Levanyuk house was crowded with women. They made way for the doctor, they all knew him already.

"The baby is already born," one of them said.

"Then I am not wanted after all."

"Oh, but you must go and have a look at her, she has suffered so long, she is quite weak."

"Here, Auntie, I have brought the doctor to see you," Lida announced.

"What for, what for, what do I want a doctor for? And such a young one too!" the patient said. "I don't need anything, it's not the first time I have had a baby. But if you would like to see the baby."

The young doctor bent over the cradle.

"A boy?"

"Yes, a boy. I have only one little girl, Niurka, the others are all boys. It's in the breed, I suppose."

"A fine little boy. What are you going to call him?"

"We've already talked it over with the women. I wanted to call him Mitya after his elder brother, but they say it's unlucky to do that."

"And where is his brother?"

"Why, we buried him to-day, my eldest, together with all the others. He hung a month on the gallows, I took him down myself to-day," Levanyukchikha explained serenely.

The doctor was embarrassed.

"I didn't know that was your son."

"Yes, my eldest. He tried to join the guerillas and the Germans caught him at it. He was the eldest, seventeen he would have been next birthday. I wanted to call this one Mitya, same as him. But the women say that wouldn't do, so now I don't know what to call him."

"Call him Victor," the doctor suggested. "It means he who conquered. He was born to-day, so why not call him conqueror?"

Levanyukchikha turned the matter over in her mind.

"Well, if it means 'conqueror,' let him be Victor. What do you think, Lida?"

"If the doctor says so."

"Why chew it over so long? There isn't a single Victor in the village, so let him be Victor. Come, sit down, doctor, stay with us a little."

"Thank you, but I must go back, the wounded are waiting."

"Oh, no, you've already bandaged them all, the women told me all about it. Sit down a little. There are Red Army men in

every house, but I had nobody because I was going to have the baby You, Lida, get the spirits from the cupboard, there's a bottle there "

"Perhaps you had better not, " the doctor muttered timidly. She smiled

"Why not? You may have learnt how to heal wounds, but one can see they didn't teach you much about women's insides A glass of vodka will do me a lot of good "

The doctor made no further objection and Lida poured him out a tot in a thick greenish glass

"To the new-born . may he grow up healthy "

"May he never see Germans in the house .

"May every day from this his birthday onwards bring fresh victories!"

"May he grow up to be like his brother Mitya!"

The doctor was mortally tired He had had no sleep for a long time The drink spread a pleasant warmth through his body and went to his head He was sitting on the settee and he felt in here that he had left the war behind, somewhere very far away The walls of the cottage gleamed with a friendly whiteness, the stove was decorated with painted flowers and there were gaily embroidered cloths displayed in the corners Pretty Lida was smiling at him It was hard to believe that wounded men were lying only a few houses away, that a fresh grave-mound rose on the green by the church. It was as if the road of horrors along which he had been walking since the first day of the war was only a dream

"Lida, show the doctor the picture, it's there behind the ikon, show him "

The doctor took the faded photograph and looked at the saucy boyish face

"The frost changed him so, you would have hardly recognized him But this is what he was like when he was alive," the mother explained calmly

The doctor thought of his own mother He remembered her trembling white hands, her eyes dark with emotion, the breaking of her voice when she said good-bye He remembered the nights full of agonizing broodings, the apprehension he always felt and could never overcome at the thought of each new transport of wounded, the fear he could not master, the fear of blood, wounds and death. 'Nerves,' he said to himself in such cases, but that did not help The nerves were still nerves and made themselves felt more and more Instead of growing firmer they grew ever shakier as the war dragged on

He looked at the woman in childbed. She lay on her back, her head on a pink chequered pillow, her calm face framed in dark hair brushed smoothly back. For a whole month this woman had listened to the howling wind swinging the body of her eldest son on the gallows. For a whole month she and her children had been slowly starving, had lived in constant fear of death. Pregnant, she had taken the body of her sixteen-year-old son from the gallows and carried him to his grave and then gone home to bear another son. And now she was calmly talking to him, the doctor, offering him the last drops of the drink she had succeeded in hiding from the Germans.

The village women came in from the passage and sat down on the stools and the settee. The young doctor looked at them covertly. They had all lived under the German yoke, under the German knout. Their husbands and sons were far away in the fighting line. None of these women knew whether their menfolk were alive or dead. They had all lived through the frosts of this terrible winter, suffered from the starvation the German troops brought into the villages wherever they went. Many of them had bruises, bore the marks of German rifle-butts on the bodies. But unless you knew all this, it was impossible to guess at it from their behaviour. Their faces were calm, serene, full of a dignity flowing from some secret source, from the hidden depths of the heart.

'Peasant women,' he thought, and the word acquired a new significance in his mind.

"If we had more vodka, we could drink to the memory of Mitya," Levanyuchikha said quietly.

"Never mind," Terpilikha interrupted her hastily. "We'll remember him well enough, without drinks. Isn't that true?" she asked, turning to the other women.

"Of course we'll remember him."

"And now there is Victor to take his place. He will grow up like Mitya, he will work hard and if necessary, he will give his life for his country, like Mitya."

The drink threw a pleasant rosy cloud over the doctor's brain. He wanted to say something to these women, something friendly, something tender. His heart contracted with pity for the boy who had perished on the gallows and the mother who had cut him from the noose with her own hands, for all these people who had suffered so atrociously.

"You're drunk," he said sternly to himself. But that did not help. His eyes filled with tears.

"What's wrong with you?" Lida asked anxiously.

"I'm just sorry, . . ." he stammered, trying to regain control over himself

Levanyuchikha looked at him intently with her intelligent dark eyes

"There's no call to be sorry these are no times for being sorry," she said quietly "Mitya is gone, but we have Victor in his stead Our people are strong, well rooted in the earth Cut down a pear-tree, and before you know where you are, a fresh shoot comes out of the ground and drives upwards towards the sun Mitya is gone and many others, but the earth is here and so are the people More than once we thought the Germans would kill us all before you lads could get here And now we've lived to see you after all . . . The people can endure everything No, with our people the Germans have bitten off more than they can chew "

The mist before the doctor's eyes thinned and cleared away This peasant woman had answered all his intricate, confused thoughts which had tormented him so often and she had answered them simply, calmly, in the peasant manner He was ashamed of himself

"Yes, you're quite right "

"You are young and it's hard on you Never mind, all this will be over some time Then you will live quietly and heal the sick and we will be doing our sort of work "

He jumped up, remembering that he ought to be back at the hospital

The village outside was loud with song The girls were singing at the top of their voices, caring nothing about the cold Male voices seconded them The songs rang out in the icy air, into the clear blueness undisturbed by the slightest breath of wind Their voices soared like larks towards the sky, as if making up for the whole month of silence which had lain on the village like a shroud

The village was used to singing from the earliest times The people greeted the dawn with a song, took leave with a song of the parting day, made ready for sleep with a song Songs helped to gather the wheat from the fields, helped to rake together the scented hay, helped the children to graze the cattle, the men to thresh the corn Songs accompanied the bride at the wedding, songs bade farewell to those who died and withdrew into the earth There were sad songs of former times, older than the lime-trees lining the road and joyous new songs born of the new days The people were used to linking up their life with songs and their songs with life.

They had been silent a whole month. For a whole month no songs had escaped their lips. The cottages had been dumb, and dumb the gardens.

But now they could sing once more. And the girls sang at the top of their voices, filling the village and the wide snowy plain with heart-easing familiar songs. Song followed song. Songs rang out over the gully and the road and the green and the village soviet, where lame Alexander was standing on a ladder fixing a large sign, 'Village Soviet.' The children stood around in a crowd and stared at the familiar sign, with heads thrown back. Inside, the people were hurriedly clearing away all traces of the nocturnal battle. They boarded up the loop-holes made by the Germans in the walls and carried out the sandbags. The women scrubbed the pools of German blood from the floor.

"Let no trace of them be left by this evening," one of the women said, and all the others nodded in agreement.

This was what they all wanted—they were all anxious to wipe out, on the very first day, before the sun could set, all traces of the thirty days of German rule. Someone had knocked down the gallows on the green, vainly trying to dig the poles out of the frozen earth, someone else brought a saw and started to saw the poles off at ground level, the women hurriedly white-washed the neglected cottages where the Germans had lived, cleared the German dung out with shovels and pitchforks. Everybody was as busy as if it were harvest time.

"Not a trace of them shall remain," said the women as they scrubbed the floors and whitewashed the walls.

"Not a trace of them shall remain," repeated the children as they picked up scraps of iron, empty cartridge-cases, and rags of German uniforms around the former German Kommandantur and the gun-site.

Red Army men wading in snow up to the waist, hurriedly laid telephone wires. Lieutenant Shalov was establishing contact. In the schoolroom German prisoners were being questioned. The villagers badly wanted to hear what was going on in there but they understood that it was a military matter and could not be interfered with.

"What are they coddling them for?" Terpilikha grumbled. "Questioning them and all that. Stand them up behind the barn and put a bullet through their brain."

"You don't understand. They must find out everything they can from the fritzies, mustn't they?"

"All right, find out first and then—a bullet, and finished."

"What, shoot prisoners? Who ever heard of such a thing?"

Terpilikha flared up

"What's that? Prisoners? You saw what they did to our prisoners! Prisoners! I'd boil them in tar, flay them alive! But of course we don't do such things, we'll just lock them up all nice and polite, and that's the end of it!"

"It's nothing to do with us," Pelcharikha insisted. "That's in the rules of war—prisoners must be left alive."

"Rules of war! You and your rules of war! There are no rules of war now! Perhaps in the other war, but not now. What about killing women and children? Is that what you call rules of war?"

The other woman sighed

"Need you tell *me*? You know well enough what they did to me!"

"That's why I'm surprised that you're all for the rules of war. The rules of war are for fighting men, but are these devils fighting men? They're just lousy fritzies!"

Pelcharikha made no reply. She thought the same as all the others. But she felt it would be a disgrace to do things the same way as the Germans.

"Keep them here, feed them well on our food and send them home alive and well! Let them sit as safe as in a savings-bank all through the war!" Terpilikha grumbled.

"Leave it to the lieutenant. He'll do what is required." Alexander intervened in the dispute of the women.

"Did I say he wouldn't? I wasn't trying to do the lieutenant's job."

"Good job you didn't," Alexander barked, and limped away home to paint another sign 'School'. Of course, the sign wouldn't be as beautiful as the old one—Alexander was not equal to that, but it would serve to eliminate the traces of the German occupation and help to restore the former aspect of the village.

Suddenly the clear bright azure, loud with song, was rent by the rumble of an explosion. The singing ceased and the children playing in front of the cottages froze into immobility.

"What was that?"

There was another deafening crash. The thunder of gunfire filled the air.

"It's gunfire."

"In Okhaby, on that side . . ."

"In Zelentsy . . ."

"Is it our guns firing?"

They all listened. The artillery thundered on, waking long rumbling echoes. No one said another word for some time.

"What's that again?"

"A battle

"It's our guns shooting, they're ours "

"And since when do you know all about artillery?"

"I can hear the sound coming from that direction, where our lads are "

The villagers scrutinized the faces of the Red Army men, but they were quite calm One of them said "Yes, it's our guns, we must widen the wedge "

"What wedge?"

"Well, you see, we broke through here, but there are Germans behind us and on both sides "

"Didn't I say it from the start—it's a wedge?"

"You said nothing of the sort, Auntie!"

"Oh, I didn't, didn't I? Just because you didn't hear it! I said at once—it's a wedge . . . Anybody can understand that, we all know the Germans are still in Okhaby "

"Now the fritzies will run as fast as they can . . . "

"Run this way?" Olga Palanchuk asked in a frightened voice

"Why not?" Terpilikha set her hands on her hips in a martial pose "We'll give them a right warm welcome if they do!"

"Why should they come here? There's another road leading straight towards the west "

"If any of them are left alive at all "

They all listened Out there, far away, a battle was in progress and guns were firing The wedge driven into the German positions was being widened

Lieutenant Shalov was questioning the Germans in the school-room They stood before him in the warm room shaking and trembling with a nervous tremor He looked at them as they stood there, lean, ragged, covered with boils, and evil-smelling discharging ulcers. It was warm in the room and the lice were biting them intolerably They scratched themselves on the sly without taking their eyes off Shalov. Only five men were left out of Captain Werner's entire garrison

"They must be sent to the rear, what shall we do with them here?" the lieutenant decided

"Send them back?" a sturdy young Red Army man frowned "Do them in on the spot, comrade lieutenant "

"Nonsense!"

"It's a pity to give them an escort, make the men chase about in the snow, looking after them "

"Send the sergeant to me," Shalov ordered, refusing to enter into a discussion

He went outside into the passage for a breath of air. He had spent a whole hour in the room with the prisoners and it seemed to him now as if lice were crawling all over him, as if he were covered with dirt, as if his very uniform was soaked in the disgusting stench of long-unwashed, ulcerated human bodies.

Shalov gulped in the frosty air in deep mouthfuls. In the bright sunlight, the sky was scintillating with the strong, unabated frost. Snatches of a song reached him from a distant cottage and he listened to the lilting, caressing, jaunty chorus, a tune born of the wind of wide steppes, of the rushing of torrential waters running to the sea, of the endless fertile plains. In the song was an echo of the Cossack war-cries resounding over the Dnyepir rapids, of the complaint of brave warriors in Turkish captivity, of the clatter of hoofs on distant roads. The girls sang and it seemed as if the whole village were singing and looking up at the dazzling golden sun in the frosty heavens.

Red Army men escorted the prisoners out of the schoolhouse. A crowd gathered slowly round them. The Germans shivered under the eyes of the women, drew their heads in between their shoulders and shook with cold.

"Taking them away, are you?" Terpilikha asked in a hostile tone.

"I am sending them back to headquarters," replied Shalov, mustering the group of Germans huddled in their ragged greenish overcoats.

"This is the one who hanged Levanyuk!" Pelcharikha suddenly shouted.

The women rushed forward.

"Which one? Which one is it?"

"That sandy-haired one, look, you all saw him do it! That tall one!" Pelcharikha was still shouting.

"Quite true, it's the very one!"

The crowd surrounded the prisoners in an ever-closer ring. The women pushed forward and pointed their fingers at a tall German with a bunch of sandy hair showing under his cap. He realized that the crowd was discussing him and stepped back behind his comrades.

"Look, he's trying to hide. Comrade lieutenant, this is the one who hanged the poor lad!"

"Lad? Why Mitya was only sixteen! It was a child he hanged, the dirty swine!"

"Come on, women, don't talk so much. We can handle him on our own," Terpilikha proposed.

The Red Army men looked around dubiously.

"Hold on a minute, citizeness, what are you trying to do?" Shalov was angry. "Kindly step back there!"

"Comrade commander, he mustn't get away from here alive! We'll settle his hash and everything will be fine!" Terpilikha insisted.

The German obviously understood what was going on and stood trembling, with chattering teeth.

"It is I who am giving the orders here, not you," Shalov said sternly.

Fedossya Kravchuk pushed her way through the crowd.

"Better keep your nose out of what is not your business, Gorpina! Why need you meddle where you're not wanted? Is it a massacre you want? Haven't there been enough dead men here? Do you think there is no judge wiser than you?"

Terpilikha stepped back a pace and stared at Fedossya as if she didn't understand her words.

"You want to kill him? Give him an easy death, eh? A minute or two and it's all over. Shall he pay with two short minutes for Levanyuk? For our children, for all those who have perished? No, let him live, let him meet his fate, let him drink his cup to the dregs, to the last drop! Let him return to his own country and watch it pay for everything, for everything, not only for Levanyuk alone!"

"Fedossya's right," said Pelcharikha.

"True, Fedossya!" other voices chorused.

"I will tell you one thing, Gorpina. Those Germans who die now are enjoying a great advantage. No; you let him see the German troops roll back, then run, die of hunger, wander about in the steppes where from behind every bush, out of every wood people will jump out with pitchforks and axes to kill them! Let him see his mates die in the ditches with no one to give them so much as a drop of water! Let him see, let him look on, when his own towns and villages will be blown away by the wind, when nothing is left of them except ashes and nettles growing where they used to be. Let him live to hear his own wife curse him and his own children repudiate him! And you want to make him a present of an easy death? You are a silly woman, Gorpina, though you are old. Dying is easy, but let him live, let him live a hundred years! Let him beg death to come for him and let him beg in vain, let even death turn away from this German carrion!"

She choked on her own words, pressed her hand to her heart and was silent.

"What Fedossya says is true!" Pelcharikha seconded her and the ring of women opened out.

Two Red Army men led the prisoners off along the road. Terpiukha stood motionless and looked after them.

"A-ach!" She waved her hand in resignation. "Looking at you, women, one might think you were ever so rough, but your anger flies away quickly enough."

"So you think Fedossya Kravchuk is too gentle?"

"I don't understand her talk. I'd like to have it my way, simply."

She ceased speaking and listened.

"Am I imagining things or have they stopped firing from the guns?"

Puzyrukha listened too.

"No, it's really quiet. They must have stopped shooting long ago but we made such a din here over these prisoners that we never noticed."

"What can it be? Is the battle over—or is it something else? Perhaps we might ask someone, but who would know?"

"The commander would surely know."

But it was not only the women who noticed the sudden silence that had fallen out there in the distance where the edge of the forest showed black against the snow. Shalov came into the schoolroom at short intervals. The telephone orderly was sitting with the receiver in his hand.

"Ring again! No reply?"

"No, nothing."

"Send a man along the line to see whether it's broken. And you go on trying to get through."

Finally the telephone rang. The Red Army man wrote rapidly.

"Well, what is it?"

"We have taken Okhaby and Zelentsy."

Shalov went outside. The first person he met was Terpiukha. He told her:

"We have taken Okhaby and Zelentsy."

She raised her hands in surprise.

"So that was why it was so quiet all of a sudden."

"That was why."

She picked up her skirts and ran to overtake Puzyrukha.

"Nataalka, have you heard? We have taken Okhaby and Zelentsy! The lieutenant told me so himself. As soon as the telephone rang, he came outside and told me we have taken Okhaby and Zelentsy."

"We have taken them!" Puzyrukha said in a high resonant voice.

"Didn't I tell you from the start? As soon as it was quiet I said, 'one can see the battle is over' "

"But you didn't know how it ended!"

"How can you say I didn't know? How else would it end? The Germans were driven out, the wedge was widened and finished! Understand?"

"Look how learned you are getting in military matters!"

The telephone was ringing all the time Shalov shouted into the receiver "Where? In what direction?"

The whole village hummed like a hive The Red Army men mustered at the run

"Where are you going? Where?" the women asked, all agog.

"The order has come We're moving on "

"Where to?"

"Westwards, mother!"

The women were disappointed They thought the whole thing unlikely Fedossya Kravchuk approached the lieutenant

"What's all this? The borsch is just about ready and you haven't had a proper meal yet "

"Never mind, Mother We're not hungry The order has come to advance! Others will eat the borsch, another unit is coming here, they will be your garrison, you can feed those if you like "

The men assembled in a hurry, leaving the spoons in the bowls, the slices of bread half eaten

"Oh, boys, couldn't you have stayed just another day or two?" the women sighed

"Thanks! But we haven't got any more time. Others will come to you, but we must be off The Germans are waiting!"

"Of course they're waiting," the women sighed and stood about in the street, while the unit lined up Old and young came out to give them a send-off Sonyka Limats was hugging a young Red Army man and shedding tears

"Look at Sonyka! Quick work!" the women laughed

"Not so bad, the laddie Look at those eyebrows!"

Lieutenant Shalov came hurriedly out of the house. The unit was already lined up

"Forward—march!"

"Good-bye! Good luck! Come back safe! Fight them to a finish!" the villagers shouted

The snow crunched under the boots of the marching unit. The children ran by their side, trying to keep in step with the fighting men and the women hurried along, holding up their long skirts.

The Red Army men marched slowly, until they reached a little knoll, and here they came to a halt

The dazzling-white snowy plain stretched out endlessly towards the west. Far away a thin streak of smoke sullied the pure blue of the sky—the ruins of the unfortunate village of Levanevka were still smouldering there. The Germans had set the village alight at all four corners. The flames had been extinguished several times but the fire flared up again and again among the ashes, polluting the clear azure with its dark smoke.

Lieutenant Shalov looked towards the west from the horizon. In front of him lay the snowy plain, farther than the eye could reach—the Ukrainian steppe under the German heel. There in the west lay the Ukraine, covered with blood, wrapped in flame, with its songs smothered on the lips of its people, its breast trampled under the German jackboot, crushed, outraged, in chains, but undaunted, fighting, and fearless.

Then he saw the rainbow throw its arc across the sky, a shining path, a radiant streak iridescent with the colours of the briar and the rose, the lilac and the violet, the gold of the sun flower and the green of fresh buds of the birch-tree. The rainbow stretched from east to west linking earth and sky with its flaming band.

Shalov turned to his men.

"Follow me! Forward—march!"

The unit moved forward with measured, regular tread. The villagers stayed behind. No one spoke. The unit went on its way along the road into the endless distance of the dazzling white plain under the radiant arch of the rainbow.

They marched away towards the streaks of smoke rising in the distance from the burnt-out village of Levanevka, towards other villages crouching in snow-lined hollows. Gripping the rifles in their hands they marched towards the land of the Ukraine, trampled underfoot, suffocating under the German yoke, and yet unconquered, inflexible, still fighting back.

The villagers were silent. They strained their eyes until they ached and watered, following the unit as long as possible before it melted into the blue distance, into the snowy infinity of the plain and the multi-coloured all-pervading glow of the rainbow.

